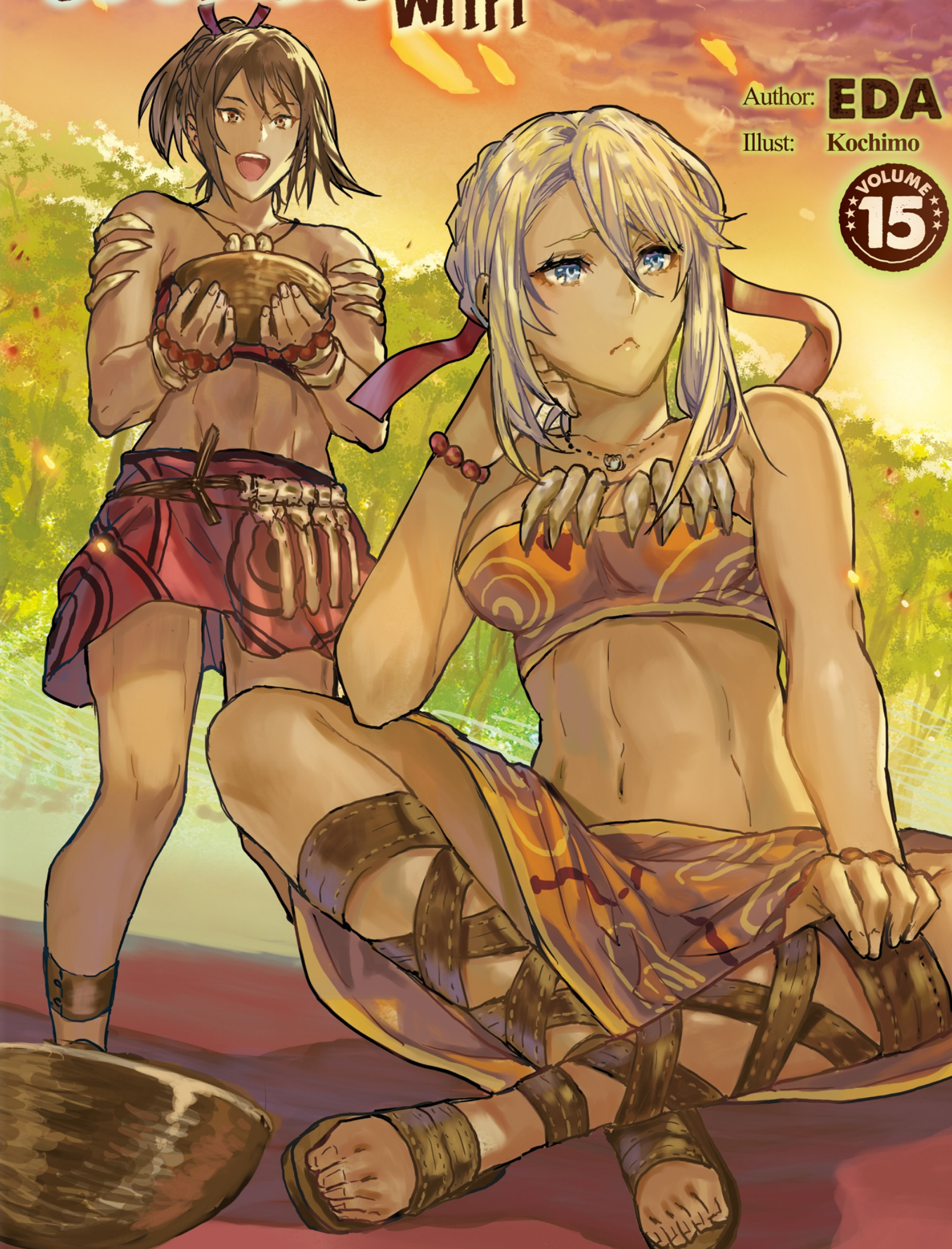


COOKING WITH WILD GAME

Author: **EDA**

Illust: Kochimo

VOLUME
15

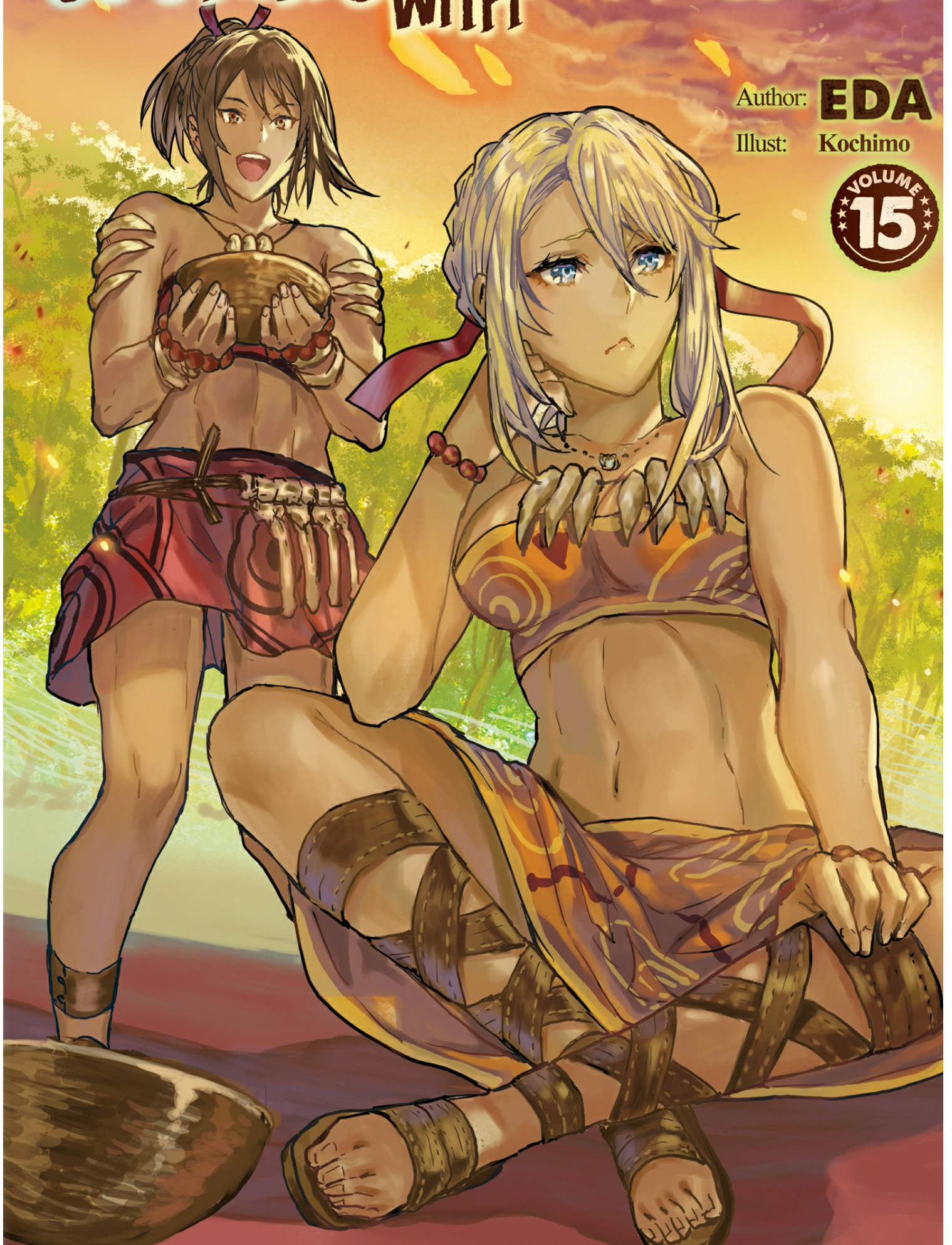




COOKING WITH WILD GAME

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COOKING WITH WILD GAME

VOLUME 15

"It's nothing
all that
complicated.
I simply wish
for a contest
with you."

"A contest?"

"Yes, a
contest of
strength
between
hunters,"
Lem Dom
replied with
an even more
daring grin.



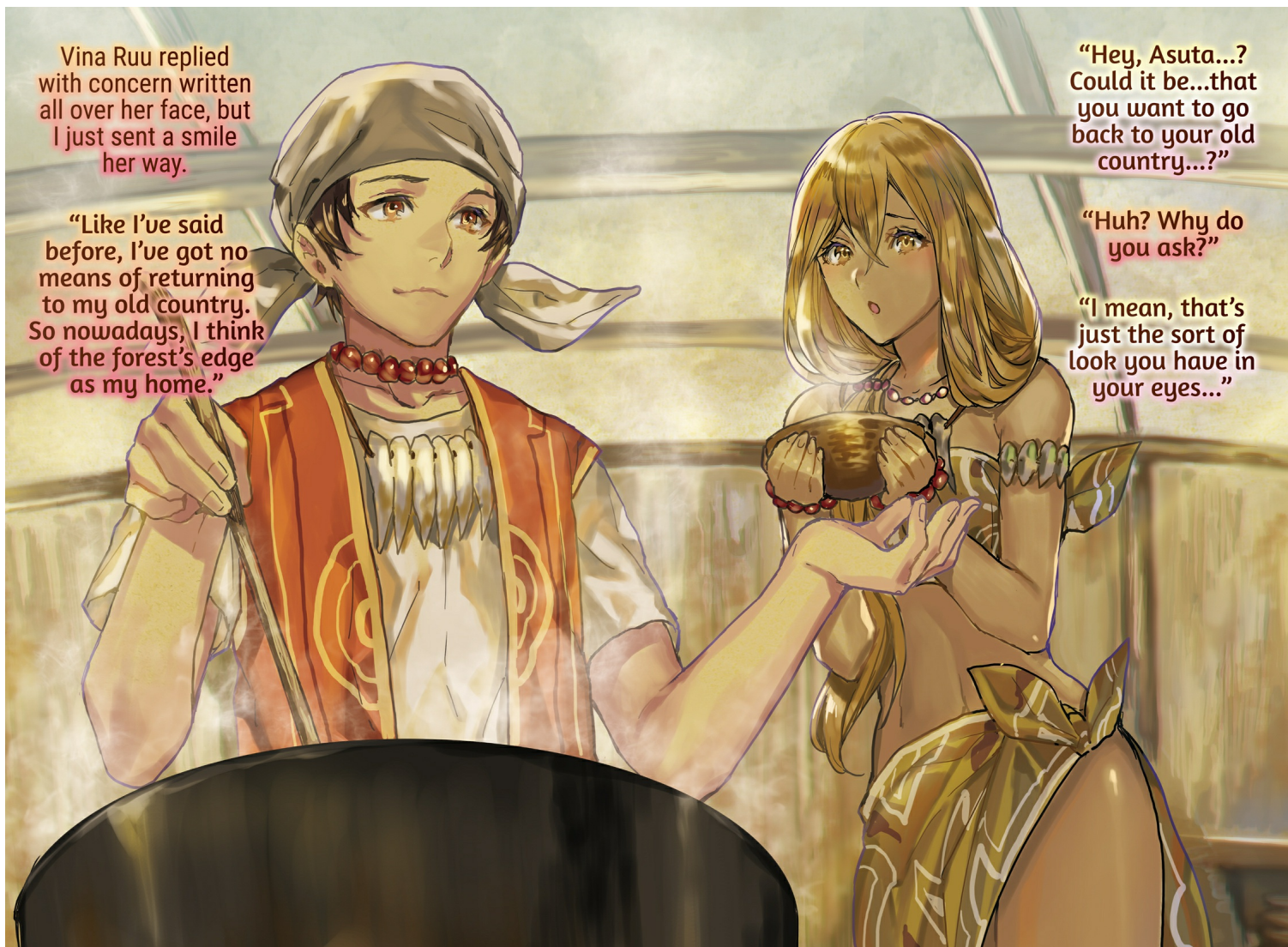
Vina Ruu replied with concern written all over her face, but I just sent a smile her way.

“Like I’ve said before, I’ve got no means of returning to my old country. So nowadays, I think of the forest’s edge as my home.”

“Hey, Asuta...? Could it be...that you want to go back to your old country...?”

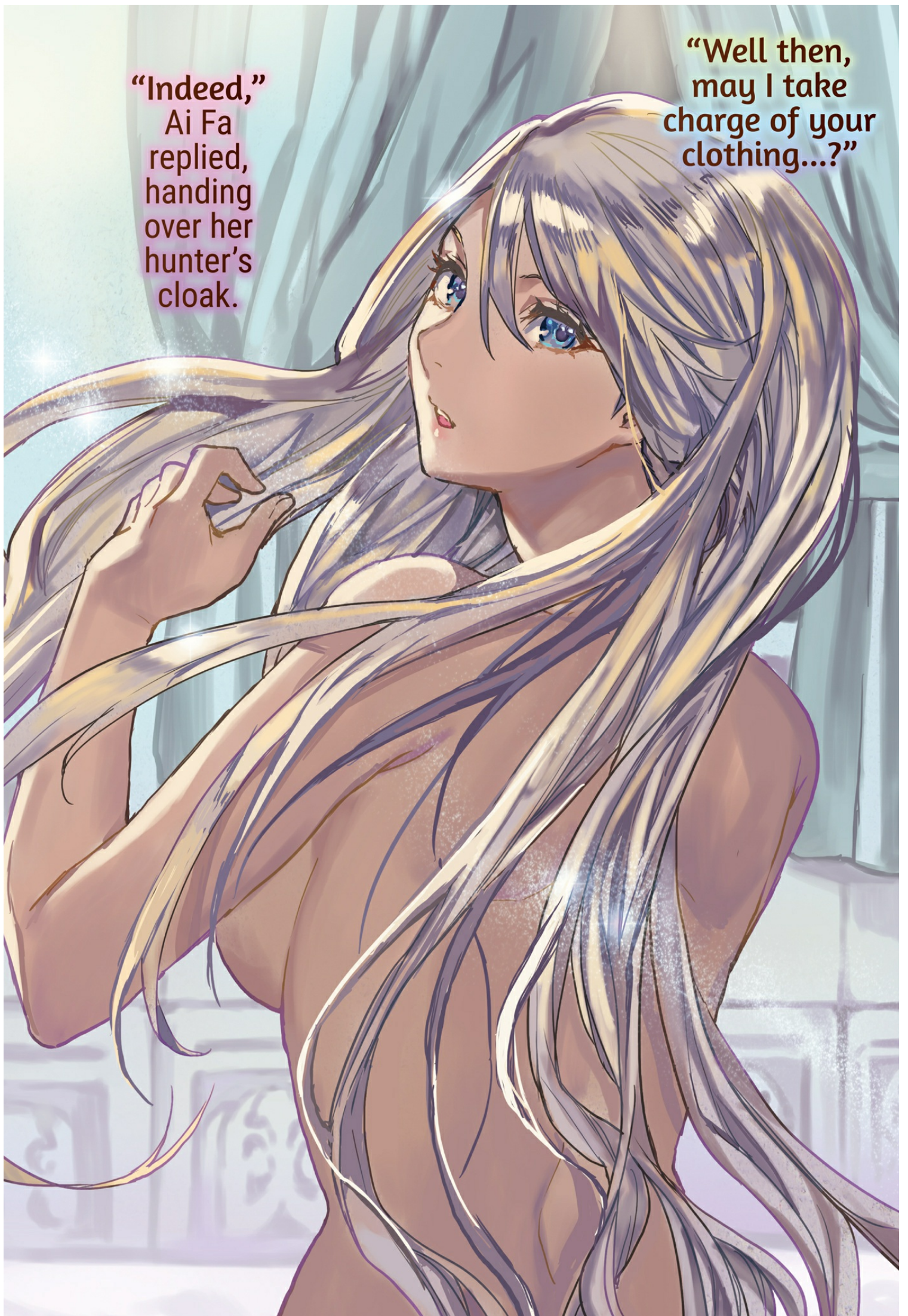
“Huh? Why do you ask?”

“I mean, that’s just the sort of look you have in your eyes...”



“Indeed,”
Ai Fa
replied,
handing
over her
hunter’s
cloak.

“Well then,
may I take
charge of your
clothing...?”



MENU

Chapter 1: Two Girls

Chapter 2: Passing Days

Chapter 3: The Rutim Banquet

Group Performance

Chapter 1: Melancholy of
the Second Ruu Son

Chapter 2: Welcome to
the Westerly Wind

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Chapter 1: Two Girls

1

It was the twenty-second of the black month, the day after Myme and Mikel visited the forest's edge.

Today, I finished my morning's work without incident, then headed off for the post town by wagon.

I was in quite a good mood thanks to my time spent with Myme, a girl of rare talent who had been dealt a poor hand by fate. Just the thought of what sort of dish the girl would make with the giba meat I had Mikel take home with him was enough to make my heart soar.

On top of that, I got the sense that I was becoming closer to Mikel, despite how hard the man was to read, so that was something else to be glad for.

And all of this is because we were able to expose Cyclaeus and Ciluel's crimes. Maybe I'm overstating it, but it feels like everyone's fates had been seriously distorted, but now they're finally getting back on track... Is that what's got me feeling so happy?

My days were only getting busier and busier, but I was also feeling more and more fulfilled. It was hard to imagine anything better than getting to devote myself to doing business in the post town without having to worry about anyone interfering. I just wanted to keep working hard to bring more prosperity to the people of the forest's edge, and to make it known far and wide just how delicious giba meat really was.

Still, Toor Deen sure is awfully quiet today... I thought to myself as I manipulated Gilulu's reins from up in the driver's seat.

Toor Deen was seated leaning up against the wall of the wagon, supporting wooden boxes full of meals so they wouldn't fall over. And her expression really did look more listless than usual.

“Are you all right, Toor Deen? You seem pretty down,” I called out.

At that, she looked up and replied, “Huh? Wh-Who, me? I don’t think I seem down...”

“I see. I remember you talking less than usual during the prep work too, though,” I added as I turned toward the front so as not to cause an accident. “Could it be that Myme has you concerned...?”

Last evening when she had tasted the myamuu soup Myme prepared, Toor Deen had been so shocked that she was left at a loss for words and ended up silently returning home to the Deen clan.

It had been an irreplaceable encounter for me, but it might not have been that way for everyone. I really had never expected Myme to be that skilled, and that was the one concern that was still weighing on me.

“I can’t say she’s not on my mind, of course. It really was a shock, seeing how a girl not much different in age from me could make a dish like that.”

“Yeah, I was surprised too.”

“But more than just that, it also made me painfully aware of how lacking I am,” she said listlessly, giving a little sigh.

I was growing more and more concerned as I sat there holding Gilulu’s reins. “But apparently Mikel has been teaching Myme how to cook for as long as she can remember. And he was one of the foremost cooks in the castle town...”

“Right. It’s presumptuous to compare myself to someone like her.”

“That’s not what I meant, Toor Deen.”

“It’s all right. I’m not really trying to put myself down.” As she spoke, I thought I sensed her coming closer, until her little head suddenly peeked out beside the driver’s seat. “Did I make you worry about me? I was just thinking about how I could get better at cooking.”

From the look in Toor Deen’s eyes, it seemed more like she was worried about me.

And as I looked back into those pretty eyes, Toor Deen’s cheeks suddenly went red and her gaze shifted to the path in front of us.

“I’d like to believe what you said, about me still having room left to grow. And it’s not like putting myself down will make my cooking taste any better...”

“Right. As long as you can think that way, then that’s all that matters.”

At that, Toor Deen broke out in a smile, still facing ahead. And there didn’t seem to be any negative emotions whatsoever hidden behind that grin.

“I want to try as hard as I can so I can make food anyone will find tasty, just like you and that girl. So I hope you’ll keep on teaching me, Asuta...”

“Of course. And I’d love to keep working with you too.”

Toor Deen really did have her act together. I breathed a sigh of relief now that I knew that Myme’s presence didn’t have a negative impact on her.

Still, what about Reina Ruu and everyone else?

Before long, the wagon arrived at the Ruu settlement. Reina and Sheera Ruu had been standing in front of the main house, and they jogged over our way.

“Good morning! Asuta, could you give this dish a taste?”

“Huh? What is it?” I asked in surprise, looking at the plate Reina Ruu was holding out. Atop it was a reddish brown soup with chunks of giba meat floating in it.



“After you went home yesterday, Sheera Ruu and I tried adding all sorts of different flavors to this soup. We’d like to hear your honest impressions.”

Reina Ruu looked really fired up, while Sheera Ruu stood there silently with a firm, shining gaze. And so though I didn’t really get what was going on, I accepted the plate. The dish had a fragrant aroma of fruit wine and tarapa. They had used rib meat, and it looked like they grilled the surface before boiling it.

When I picked up the accompanying spoon and gave it a try, I nodded, “Yeah, this is tasty. You used fruit wine for the base, then added tarapa, aria, nenon...and tau oil, sugar, and myamuu, right? Or wait, did you use them to flavor the meat?”

“Yes. It’s giba meat teriyaki, just like you taught us. We aimed to harmonize the soup with the teriyaki, but how did it turn out?”

“It’s definitely good. You seem to have gotten the various ingredients in perfect harmony.”

“Really? There aren’t any flavors that are too strong or too weak?” Reina Ruu asked, placing her hands on the driver’s seat as she leaned in forward and brought her face closer. It was an adorable action like a little kid trying her hardest, but her expression was dead serious.

“Hmm, let’s see... Well, if I’m going to nitpick something, it’s only because you’re forcing my hand...”

“Right, that’s fine.”

“I’d say, if you want to bring out the sweetness of the fruit wine, it might be good to use less sugar in the teriyaki. And you could give the flavor a bit more depth by adding a lot of finely chopped aria. But honestly, I think it’s plenty tasty as is...”

“Lower the sugar and up the aria? Got it. We’ll give that a try,” Reina Ruu replied with a firm nod.

“What’s gotten into you two? I never expected to be asked to taste test something first thing in the morning. Does Myme have you that fired up?”

“Of course. Is there a chef out there who wouldn’t get worked up after seeing that girl’s skill on display?”

As Reina and Sheera Ruu burned bright with competitive spirit, Vina Ruu shrugged her seductive shoulders from behind them. And even farther back, Yamiru Lea and Tsvai wore looks of feigned disinterest.

It seemed I didn’t need to worry about Myme’s visit having a negative influence here either.



“I know she’s my little sister, but I really am taken aback by how passionate Reina is... She’s already so skilled, but she still isn’t satisfied...” Vina Ruu pondered with a sigh as she stood at the giba burger stall.

I heard those words while working over in the giba poitan wrap stall. Even though the Fa and Ruu were now running their own separate businesses, our stalls were still neighbors, so we could talk during work. And so as I cooked up some fresh giba meat for the soon-to-arrive midday peak, I called out to her.

“Well, both Reina and Sheera Ruu have a strong drive to improve themselves. And I figure it’s a good thing if seeing Myme is spurring them on further.”

“Yes, but I’m the one who has to taste test for them, and it’s been unbearable... I get the feeling I’ll start putting on more and more weight at this point...” Vina Ruu lamented as she rubbed her stomach.

I didn’t see any excess fat on her whatsoever, but I certainly wasn’t touching that subject. In all likelihood, she was still concerned about the comment that had been made regarding how easterners find slim and slender women beautiful.

But Shumiral said he found Vina Ruu beautiful regardless, so I figure she’s got nothing to worry about.

It was then that Sheera Ruu’s voice chimed in from the myamuu giba stall, the next one over.

“My apologies, Vina Ruu. We didn’t think we would find a proper path forward with just the two of us taste testing, so we wanted to get as many

opinions as possible.”

“It’s not like I’m blaming you or anything, Sheera Ruu... I just get the feeling there’s no need to be so persistent when we’re already selling so much every day...”

“No, I don’t think we should allow ourselves to grow conceited. We don’t know what will become of our sales if the people of the post town grow more skilled at handling ingredients like tau oil and sugar.” From what I could see of her expression over Vina Ruu’s shoulders, Sheera Ruu seemed to be burning with a quiet enthusiasm despite the fact that it was still morning. “You’re concerned about that too, right, Asuta? No matter how tasty giba meat may be, we’re at a disadvantage due to the high price.”

“That’s true. I don’t think the townsfolk will adjust so easily since they have no experience with seasonings, but we still can’t let our guard down,” I replied, shooting Sheera Ruu a grin. “But don’t go brooding over it too much, all right? When you’re polishing your skills, don’t forget your reason for doing so. It’s not just for its own sake. You and Reina Ruu are so serious and determined that that’s the one point that has me a bit concerned.”

“Right... I’ll be certain to bear that in mind.” Sheera Ruu nodded as she added meat to her metal tray. That cooking tool was a new one bought by the Ruu clan so that they could keep doing business without relying on the Fa.

“But you’re every bit as ambitious as they are, aren’t you, Asuta...?” Yamiru Lea whispered as she helped me out. “Your expression is the same as always, but there’s a different sort of light shining in your eyes.”

“Of course I’m super worked up. Those words of caution were meant for me too.”

“Hmm... Unfortunately for the Lea clan head, I can’t imagine I will ever be so passionate about manning the stove.”

“But you’ve been participating in our study sessions for over a month now, and your skills have improved remarkably. Aren’t you happy about that?”

My question got no response.

“What? Is Rau Lea still complaining? If he is, I’ll have a word with him.”

“That’s not necessary. The clan head hasn’t especially been voicing his dissatisfaction or anything.”

Having apparently been straining her ear, Vina Ruu chimed in with a smile, “That’s right... In fact, the Lea clan head rode his tolos all the way to the Ruu settlement before just to brag. He was saying that because you received Asuta’s instruction, the Lea women had all greatly improved their skills...”

“Is that so? I’m glad to hear it,” I said, shooting Yamiru Lea a smile, only to get back a glare out of the corner of her eyes.

“I finally understand why Ai Fa kicks you in the leg so frequently...”

“Huh? W-What do you mean?”

“It’s nothing. Would it not be wise to cook up more meat?”

“Right, I’m on it.”

Even as we chatted with each other, we were handling a steady stream of customers. Once the sun hit its peak, our businesses would face their second rush of the day. And just when the traffic passing by really started picking up, our backup members Li Sudra and Ama Min Rutim arrived.

“Sorry for the wait, Asuta. It’s time for us to switch in.”

“Right, thanks for coming, Li Sudra,” I replied, stepping back after I finished grilling up some meat.

However, Li Sudra didn’t move from her spot next to the stall.

“Yamiru Lea, could I ask you to keep handling things here for a little while? I have something I need to tell Asuta.”

“Do as you please.”

At that, I stepped away from the stalls, and a question mark popped into my mind. Li Sudra was staring at me with the usual composed look in her eyes.

“What’s up? It’s unusual for you to need to talk to me, Li Sudra.”

“Right, well...there’s actually something I have to apologize to you for,” she replied with a deep bow. “It pains me deeply to tell you this, but...before long, I will no longer be able to help you with your work.”

“Huh?! But why?!” Without thinking, I shouted out in shock.

Her head still bowed, Li Sudra continued on, “After assisting you for so long, I’ve finally gotten to the point where I can handle the job well enough, and yet... I really am sorry.”

“C-Could I at least hear your reason? Did I do something to lose the Sudra clan’s trust?”

“Of course not. It’s solely a matter of our clan’s convenience,” Li Sudra replied, slowly raising her head. Unexpectedly, I spied a faint smile on her slender, graceful face when she did so. “The truth is...I am with child.”

“Huh?”

“I have become pregnant, it seems.”

For a moment, I found myself at a loss for words.

Li Sudra hung her head just a bit, the same expression still on her face. “I can keep up with my duties for a while longer, but before long I will be unable to come to town. I wanted to tell you before then. I really am sorry...”

“N-No, please don’t apologize. That’s... That’s wonderful news!” Finally having grasped the situation, I felt a warmth welling up inside.

Despite how youthful she looked, Li Sudra was still her clan head’s wife. On top of that, I had also heard that due to the Sudra’s poverty, they had already lost two infants to starvation.

“I hadn’t realized you were pregnant. When will your child be born? Sorry for asking, but you really don’t look different at all.”

“I’m only at the stage where I just realized it myself, so there should still be several months to go. But there’s a lot involved in learning to work the stalls, so I believe it necessary to train a new woman to take over for me now,” Li Sudra answered with a serious look. “If you have no objections, the Sudra can provide that woman. There’s someone I’d definitely like to recommend.”

“But that would mean both you and your replacement would be coming to town together, right? Will you be all right with work around the house?”

“That shouldn’t be an issue if it’s just for a short while. As long as you have no

problems with it, that is.”

“Of course not. It’s a big help on my end... Still, it’s sad thinking I won’t be seeing you for a while.”

Li Sudra had started helping out with the stalls right after the clan head meeting, so it had already been over three months now. She was just a little over twenty, and she was composed, reliable, and a fast learner. Just how much relief had her gentle smile granted me by now?

As those thoughts ran through my head, Li Sudra narrowed her eyes as if she were staring at something bright.

“I’m deeply honored to hear you say so, Asuta. It’s quite frustrating to no longer be able to receive your instruction... And it makes me sad too.”

“And *I’m* honored to hear that.”

“Still, there’s some time yet before we have to say farewell. I would like to make sure the new girl has a firm understanding of the job first... So until that time comes, I look forward to continuing to work with you, Asuta,” Li Sudra said with her smile as serene as always.

2

Some time later, that day’s work in the post town came to a peaceful close.

The Sudra settlement was along the way to the Fa house, and so we first stopped by the Ruu house to hold our study session and handle preparations.

“What will you be teaching us today, Asuta?” Reina Ruu asked after we finished the prep work, looking like she could hardly contain herself.

Turning her way, I went ahead and opened up a bundle I had prepared. That act alone was enough to cause a powerful aroma to spread throughout the kitchen.

“Are those...herbs?”

“Yeah. I was thinking we’d try working with these today.”

Reina Ruu wasn’t the only one with a doubtful look on her face after hearing

that.

“But haven’t you been trying not to use too many herbs? You said you didn’t have much of a chance to use them even in your home country, so you were only really familiar with myamuu at most.”

“Yeah, but that myamuu is a crucial ingredient for us now, right? So depending on how you use them, herbs can become a powerful weapon in our arsenal.”

And so, I laid out those mostly unfamiliar herbs atop the work station one by one.

“Apparently they’ve always used a fair amount of herbs in the post town since there weren’t really any seasonings except salt to be had there. And folks seem to be liking myamuu, so I think the groundwork is there for having them try out more fragrant dishes.”

“But these herbs come from Sym, don’t they...? I’ve never seen them before in the post town.”

“Yeah. Aside from myamuu and pepe, I’m pretty sure they’re all from Sym. They had an excess of all these at the Turan manor, and seem to be having trouble figuring out what to do with them.”

The only places eager to snatch them up were the inns frequented by easterners, like The Sledgehammer, so that wasn’t really doing much to chip away at the supply. Torst, who had taken over the running of the house of Turan, had lamented this fact. And thanks to Polarth’s plotting, the Turan house’s fortunes were already on the decline, which made it essential that they sell the mountain of ingredients still being delivered to them.

“Jagar-made sugar and tau oil seem to be selling just fine in the post town. So I figured it was time for these herbs to make their mark.”

“I see... But what is there to gain from you working so hard on this? We can’t neglect our bonds with the nobles, but I believe you should just make whatever dishes you please,” Reina Ruu stated with an uncharacteristically strict look in her eyes.

However, I chose to meet that look with a smile.

“It’s not like I’m trying to make herbs more popular for the good of some nobles. And I’m not just interested in learning how to use unfamiliar ingredients. I simply thought that maybe I could make more effective use of them with the knowledge I already had.”

I figured a picture was worth a thousand words, so I went ahead and washed off a pepe leaf, then chopped it up into little bits. Next, I sliced off what looked to be appropriately sized chunks of giba rib meat.

“Let’s try sauteeing this with just pepe leaves for flavoring,” I said, using a single-handled pot (essentially a frying pan) to quickly cook it up. As the meat was heated through, the dense aroma of pepe leaf filled the kitchen. “Now then, who wants to give it a try?”

At my prompting, everyone took a bite while looking doubtful.

“My,” Ama Min Rutim proclaimed. “Just adding that aroma really does change things quite a bit. I think I may like this just as much as myamuu.”

“Right, and I think if you added a tau oil-based sauce to it, that would make for a full-fledged dish. This herb would probably go well with cuts like liver that have a strong flavor to them too.”

Pepe leaves were a type of herb that seemed to be close to garlic chives, which Nail employed to make chitt-pickles. And with them, it would be possible to make dishes akin to stir-fried meat and chives or pork liver and garlic chive stir-fry.

“This one’s next. I forgot to ask what it’s called, but you recognize the scent, right, Reina Ruu?”

“Ah... This is the one the chef named Yang used in his first dish at his stall, isn’t it?”

“Right, and I believe it’s from Selva rather than Sym. I don’t know if it’ll fit the tastes of the forest’s edge, but let’s give it a little shot.”

This herb had a sweet smell to it, similar to cinnamon. I crushed up the somewhat brownish leaf, then cooked it up along with fuwano flour and sugar.

“Oh, my...” Vina Ruu exclaimed, her eyes opening wide in surprise. “What a

lovely, sweet aroma... I would love to have Rimee give it a try..."

"That's a good idea. As you can see, you just need to heat it up with fuwano and sugar, so I figure anyone can handle it no problem."

By this point, every other person present looked shocked. But, well, that was no big surprise, seeing how their only familiarity with sweets came from the chatchi mochi I had made in the past.

"This sweet flavor may not pair too well with other dishes, but it sure does pack a lot of taste for a single herb, doesn't it? I think it's definitely worth experimenting with." As I looked out over the group, I added, "And also, I talked to Nail since he knows a lot about herbs, and he said these can have a variety of additional effects. For example, this yellow one can break down the toxins in your body, while this black one can re-nourish you, and this scarlet one promotes digestion... Thanks to the illness he suffered from, Cyclaeus gathered up all sorts of herbs like these that are good for the body."

"I see... It's almost like they're medicine."

"Yeah. In the proper quantities, tau oil, sugar, and reten oil can all be good for you, but these herbs are way more effective on that front. So if we can employ them in tasty dishes, that should help bring even greater strength to the people of the forest's edge."

It was then Sheera Ruu's turn to look taken aback.

"Asuta... Is that what you meant earlier when you talked about not trying to get better for its own sake?"

"Yes. We're improving our skills to help our sales too, but for us people of the forest's edge, our most important reason to do so is to feed our families and comrades delicious and nutritious meals. My family also sold cooking back in my home country, so I want to make sure I don't slip up and neglect that point."

"That's true... I've been striving to improve at cooking, but I may well have lost sight of that objective a bit," Sheera Ruu replied, casting her gaze downwards.

From next to her, Reina Ruu nodded, "I understand. You've been thinking about many things that have slipped by us as you manned the stove, Asuta. My

apologies if my lack of discretion put a damper on anything.”

“Nah, go ahead and speak your mind. Otherwise, I may end up stepping off the proper path myself,” I cheerfully answered, then shrugged my shoulders. “Well then, let’s get this study session rolling. I’ve got this new dish I wanna take a swing at, so could I have you all give it a try?”

“Yes, of course,” Reina Ruu replied with a smile, seeming like she had finally moved on. “What do you want us to do first?”

“Well, could I have you grind up these five varieties of herbs like I showed you? I think we’ll find the answer there.”

“The answer?”

“Yeah. The answer to what sort of spices are essential for the taste I’m aiming for.”

Out of countless varieties of herbs, I had ultimately chosen these five for now.

One was orange, with a long and narrow shape.

The next was yellowish-brown and flat.

Another was blackish and serrated.

There was also a dark brown root that wrapped around like a dried-out vine.

Then lastly, there was a fruit with what looked like a wide-open mouth through which little seeds were visible, like with an akebia.

Every last one of them had been dried out for transport from Sym, so it didn’t take much effort at all to grind them up. For now, I broke open the akebia-like fruit’s hard skin and moved just the seeds inside to a plate, where I ground them up with a stick shaped like a pestle.

And as those five different spices were ground, a really peculiar scent filled the kitchen.

“This is unbearable. Won’t this smell end up clinging to us if we don’t move outside?”

Taking up Bartha’s suggestion, we evacuated the kitchen.

As she continued grating away without stopping, Reina Ruu breathed a sigh.

“This is making my nose feel all funny. It must be even worse for you with your sense of smell, right, Asuta?”

“Yeah. But it sure smells good, doesn’t it?”

It was certainly powerful, but it felt somehow nostalgic too. My task for today was to pin down the source of that homesick sensation.

“Vina Ruu, could you hand me that plate?”

She had been put in charge of the vine-like root. After taking the plate from her, I stuck a finger into the ground powder, then checked its taste and smell. Although, there really was no real strong taste to it. Despite the slightly sour and powerfully spicy aroma, it didn’t have much of a flavor. However, the smell seemed closest to what I was seeking.

“This one’s the best bet, I’d say. Please grate down all the rest of what’s on that plate.”

“Right, I’m on it...”

“What did you have, Toor Deen? Ah, the black one? Let me see it.”

As I licked it, there was a stinging sensation on my tongue, after which a sour smell like lemon filled my nose.

This might have been what Timalo had used in his soup for the dinner party. It seemed like the sort of aroma you’d find in Thai food, so while it wasn’t half bad, I didn’t expect there would be a use for it this time around.

“What about this one, Asuta?” Sheera Ruu asked, holding out her plate with a little mound of yellow powder atop it.

“Hmm... Looking at it now, that sure is a vibrant color.”

This herb wasn’t spicy at all. Instead, it had an earthy, slightly bitter taste to it. I couldn’t quite pinpoint why, but there was something about it that drew me in.

“Let’s put that one to the side for now... Ah, thank you, Li Sudra.”

Next up was the orange herb. Despite the incredibly spicy smell, it didn’t have much of a taste to it either.

The people of Sym apparently liked the spiciness from chitt seeds, so perhaps these herbs were used to add nourishment and depth to the flavor.

“Ah, right. I believe Nail said this herb should be mixed with water.”

“Is that so? In that case, I’ll go get some.”

Li Sudra gracefully did an about-face, then went and got a container of water from the kitchen.

After thanking her, I went ahead and ground up the powdered herb a bit more with some of the water. When I gave it a taste afterward, my tongue was struck by a spicy mustard-like flavor.

“Ah, that’s a spicy one. But it seems like it could pair well with giba meat, depending on how you used it.”

Still, mustard was another flavor that wouldn’t have a chance to shine today.

Finally, I tried out some of the seeds that Reina Ruu had ground up. Once again, it was spicy. And underneath that powerful spice, there was a touch of bitterness. It might have hit my sweat glands harder than anything else so far. What was more, it made me feel more refreshed than any of the others had too.

“Yup, we’ll use this one for the spiciness, and that root from before for the aroma, I guess. Vina Ruu, could I have that one again?”

I mixed a pinch of each of the powdered spices together atop my hand, then gave it a lick.

There was a synergy born between that powerful spice and strong fragrance.

It came pretty close to the ideal I was aiming for. But since both of them were dark brown, if I pinched my nose it would feel like I was eating dry sand or something.

“Could you hand me your plate too, Sheera Ruu?”

Mixing in that brilliant yellow herb brought the overall color to a yellowish brown. And when I gave it a taste, it added a touch of bitterness to the powerful spice, giving the flavor more mellowness and depth.

“Okay, I’d say the baseline flavor and aroma are set. So let’s go ahead and give cooking with these a try.”

With that, we returned to the kitchen. By placing boards atop each of the plates, we were able to suppress a bit of the powerful aroma in the air.

“Firstly, we’ll roast those three herbs from before. That’ll draw out even more of their aromas.”

“They already have such a powerful smell, but you’re going to make it even stronger?” Bartha questioned, looking astonished.

“Yes.” I smiled back. “I believe that the scents from the other ingredients will soften that up while cooking. By the way, Bartha, are you not fond of herbs?”

“No, that’s not it. I’ve made frequent use of myamuu and pepe leaves myself. And I’ve even been curious enough to purchase some eastern herbs from merchants on a whim.”

“I see.” I nodded as I used a measuring spoon to scoop up the herbs.

For now, I went with a ratio of two parts spicy seeds, three parts strong-smelling root, and two parts colorful herb. I figured that level of spice would work out for everyone from the forest’s edge, since they had been building up their tolerance bit by bit with chitt seeds. And as I dry roasted them in my single-handled pot, an even more powerful aroma filled the kitchen.

“While that’s cooling off, we’ll sauté some aria with milk fat. We’ll be more thorough with it than usual, though.”

“The Fa clan is now producing its own milk fat, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, since I like to use a bit of it every now and then.”

Since there was giba fat readily available at the forest’s edge, milk fat wasn’t as popular here as it was in the post town. Clans like the Fou and Deen had never so much as purchased karon milk, and even the Ruu had only just started buying it recently in limited quantities.

“Once the aria has turned yellowish-brown, we introduce the spices,” I explained as I tossed them back into the single-handled pot. When I roughly mixed them together with the aria, a strong aroma once more wafted into the

air. By this point, it was like our noses were being attacked in waves.

“What an awful smell. I can feel my nose wrinkling,” Tsuvai complained after remaining quiet all this time.

“Ah ha ha, just bear it for a bit longer. I mean, chitt seeds are pretty addictive once you get used to them, right?”

To be honest, the smell was seriously stirring up my appetite. And I got the feeling that the addition of the aria and milk fat had done a lot to mellow out the smell by this point.

“Next we add in the fuwano flour, mixing it thoroughly while taking care to keep it from clumping up. Then once it’s mixed, add a bit of water, aiming for a goopy texture.”

That was enough to finish it off for now. At this point I went ahead and gave it a taste, and it wasn’t half bad.

I then moved the single-handled pot over to an unlit stove, taking care not to spill it now that it was a good bit more full.

“We’ll leave this for now until it completely cools off. I believe that should allow the sweetness from the aria to better harmonize.”

“The sweetness, you say? Is that the same reason we allow meat and chatchi stew and cubed giba meat stew to cool down for a bit?”

“That’s right. Anyway, let’s go ahead and cook the other ingredients in the meantime.”

I sautéed some giba rib meat, wedges of aria, chatchi cubes, and nenon rounds. Those vegetables were equivalent to onions, potatoes, and carrots respectively. And with the aria in particular, I had cooked it first until it took on some color.

Once the various ingredients were heated through, I added some water from a jug and brought it to a boil. Then after fifteen minutes of boiling and scooping scum, I finally added in the spices. The spice mix had increased in volume with the addition of the aria and fuwano, and so I eyeballed out the appropriate amount to add into the pot.

At first I used a medium heat, then when it just about reached a boil, I reduced it to a low heat. At that point, all that was left was stirring it slowly so it didn't burn and waiting for it to finish.

"Well, I feel like it probably turned out acceptable enough for a test dish, but my apologies if it doesn't meet your expectations."

"Hmph! I've got no expectations toward a dish that stinks this bad, so no worries there!" As was often the case, that energetic complaint had come from Tsuvai. However, her glaring eyes then narrowed a bit, questioningly. "Still...maybe it's thanks to the meat and aria, but I feel like the smell's a tiny bit less bad now."

"Right? Not that I have any objections to the smell myself."

By this point, my feelings of nostalgia had reached a peak. This fondly remembered aroma, the one that made me feel all excited as the sun set... As I stirred the yellowish-brown contents of the pot, I felt a lump in my throat.

When I went ahead and took a bite, the taste was unsurprisingly rather crude. I had to say that it was definitely still far from what I saw as ideal. Back when my old man made this dish, he used commercially sold spice blends, then bought even more spices to enhance the blend on his own.

Even those commercial blends, depending on the kind, could easily go into double digits in terms of the number of spices they used, so this certainly felt lacking in comparison. I definitely had to try out a bunch more herbs and seasonings.

Still, it had turned out well enough that it was at least in the same family of dishes as that one I was so terribly nostalgic for.

"This was called curry back in my home country," I said to no one in particular. "It was an absolute staple food and one that I adored, but as you can see it's rather difficult to prepare from scratch, which is why I avoided it until now."

"You said you're not too accustomed to using herbs, but a dish like this was a staple?" Reina Ruu quietly questioned.

"Yeah, though it actually came over from another country originally. It was

then adjusted to be accepted in my home country, at which point it became a favorite. And I'm really curious if it'll end up being accepted at the forest's edge and in the post town."

"Hey, Asuta...?" another voice called out. This time, it was Vina Ruu. "Could it be...that you want to go back to your old country...?"

"Huh? Why do you ask?"

"I mean, that's just the sort of look you have in your eyes..." Vina Ruu replied with concern written all over her face, but I just sent a smile her way.

"Like I've said before, I've got no means of returning to my old country. So nowadays, I think of the forest's edge as my home."

"I see... I don't want you to go anywhere either, of course..."

In the past, Vina Ruu had said that she wanted me to take her away to my home country. But now, she had decided to try to live properly as a woman of the forest's edge. Through interacting with foreigners like me and Shumiral, her longing for the outside world only grew stronger...but in the end, she decided she couldn't just abandon her family and her home.

Meanwhile, I had grown certain that I would never return to my home country. As someone who had lost my life over there only to be dragged into this world, I would never have the means to do so in the first place.

"Asuta... Are you really all right...?"

"Yeah. I'm just feeling a bit sentimental thinking of things back home, but it's nothing to worry about."

It was true that there was a dull pain deep in my heart. I could never forget those first seventeen years of my life even if I tried. But I decided to live on, never forgetting that pain. That might have been precisely why I wanted everyone to try this dish. With such thoughts in mind, I stepped back from the stove.

"Now then, please go ahead and try it. I can't guarantee how it turned out since it's still a work in progress, but I'd love to hear everyone's honest opinions."

The giba curry I had created really did earn a wide variety of reactions.

Since I had held back quite a bit on the spiciness, it fortunately hadn't gotten any complaints on that front, but there were definitely a number of negative impressions like "It seems to be lacking something," "Your stew is tastier," and "I'd prefer it with more meat." However, nobody said that it was bad. In fact, just like with dishes using chitt seeds, I even got the comment "I kinda want to eat more, somehow."

It seemed possible that as I improved the dish, the people of the forest's edge would start to see it as delicious too. And so with those feelings firmly in mind, the day's study session came to a close.

And then...

"Ooh, what's this? What an unusual smell wafting through the air!"

A certain someone had suddenly burst into the kitchen. It was the head of the main Rutim house, Dan Rutim. Thanks to an injured right ankle, he was taking a break from hunting giba, which was why he was able to once again show up at the main Ruu house's kitchen.

"Hmm, so you're thinking up another new dish?! Would you mind letting me give it a try too?" Dan Rutim asked, his big eyes sparkling with expectation as he stood there blocking the door.

There was still a bit of curry roux left in the pot, so I smiled back and replied, "Of course. It's a bit unusual, so I don't know whether or not it will be to your tastes. But please, go right ahead."

"Thanks for that! Ah, Ruu women, is it all right if I enter the kitchen?"

"Yes, come in..."

Having gotten that permission from Vina Ruu, Dan Rutim hobbled inside with his cane.

"Hmmm, what a strange smell! But it makes me feel hungry too!"

I transferred the remaining giba curry to a plate, and the moment I held it out

toward Dan Rutim, he grabbed it from me and gulped down a bite.

“Ah, delicious! Or...is it?”

“What do you think? I’d definitely like to hear your opinion.”

“I get the feeling it’s good! At the very least, I can’t imagine being disappointed if it was served for dinner! But I also can’t help but feel that it should be even tastier...”

“Because the aroma went and got your expectations up, maybe?”

“That’s right! This smell seems to have somehow enticed me!”

In that case, it should be possible to improve the taste and meet those expectations. And that thought raised my spirits even further.

“In that case, I’ll try my best to meet your expectations, so I hope you’ll give it another taste test in the near future.”

“I’m always ready to give your cooking a taste! And I just know you’ll make this one into something incredible!”

“So, what business brought you here today, clan head?” Ama Min Rutim asked him with a gentle smile.

“Ah.” He clapped his hands together at the reminder. “That’s right, I almost forgot! You see, I was bringing a Dom woman from up north down here. You mind if I call her in?”

Now that he mentioned it, I had heard something about the Ruu clan temporarily taking in a Dom woman. But I had been so busy with Myme and Mikel that I had completely forgotten all about it.

With a strained smile from being faced with Dan Rutim’s frank and earnest admission, Vina Ruu chimed in, “My... I feel bad for her, waiting outside. Please, call her in, Dan Rutim...”

“Right! You’ve got permission, so come on in!”

At that, a slender figure entered the kitchen. Before I could stop myself, my eyes opened wide when I saw her.

So this is what a Dom woman looks like, huh...?

She was a very tall woman, probably around ten centimeters taller than I was. And she wasn't just tall, but sturdy too. Though she had a slender and elegant figure, her shoulders and upper arms were definitely muscular, and she had some real definition in her abs. Her thigh muscles were so well developed that her legs reminded me of a wild goat's.

Still, I was already accustomed to seeing burly women thanks to Bartha. But that said, this Dom woman was more than just robust. She had some incredible womanly proportions to go with her strength. Perhaps because her back muscles and buttocks were so firm, her thin waist really stood out. And on top of that, to put it bluntly, she had a large chest. She was a size bigger than Ai Fa overall and looked even more muscular. Altogether, her beauty was akin to a powerful yet graceful wild leopard.

On top of that, she had a prominent nose and a chiseled face. Though her gaze was a bit too sharp, it didn't detract from her good looks. Her black hair was pulled back high and tight, with a few seductive strands dangling down over her sharp cheekbones.

The Dom hunters wore giba skulls over their heads, but unsurprisingly that tradition didn't seem to extend to the women. However, she did have an accessory made from giba ribs wrapped around her tight waist.

This was a woman with quite the impactful appearance. However, her gaze as she scanned everyone in the room seemed rather childish. I couldn't help but get the feeling that despite her height and apparent maturity, she could be younger than I was.

"This is Lem Dom, the younger sister of Deek Dom, the head of his clan. She'll be staying here at the Ruu settlement at least until the end of the northern clans' break period, so look after her, all right?" Dan Rutim asked, while Lem Dom just quietly bowed her head.

Naturally, this must have been a matter that was discussed in advance. After all, the Ruu women looked totally at ease with the development.

"There's quite a crowd gathered, but only Vina and Reina Ruu here are from the main Ruu house. That there is Bartha, a guest. And you're from a Ruu branch house, right?"

“Yes. My name is Sheera Ruu.”

“Right! Then there’s my son’s wife Ama Min, our clan member Tsuvai, and Yamiru Lea from the Lea clan, who all fall under the Ruu. Then there’s Asuta of the Fa clan, and the Sudra and Deen women who help him out.”

“You’re Toor Deen, aren’t you? I rather enjoyed your cooking at the Jeen and Liddo wedding banquet,” Lem Dom finally spoke up.

Her voice had a strong and throaty tone, sounding both tough and coquettish at the same time. It really did fit her appearance perfectly.

“And Yamiru Lea and Tsuvai... I believe we’ve met several times at banquets before,” Lem Dom remarked, and then she broke out in a brazen smile. “Allow me to just say up front, I hate the two of you.”

That comment earned no response.

“You have already been judged for your past crimes, so I have no intention of attacking you for them. But you were members of the main Suun house, which deceived the clans under them for over ten years. That’s why I have to warn you in advance that I will never be able to bring myself to like either of you.”

“Right, well, it’s up to you who you like or don’t, Lem Dom!” Dan Rutim interjected with a hearty chuckle as he peered at the Dom woman’s face. There couldn’t be more than just a few centimeters’ difference in height between them. “But these two no longer belong to the Suun, and Tsuvai here is a precious member of my clan. You can hate them if you want, just don’t go wishing any ill on them, you hear me?”

Despite the smile on his face, there was a glare in Dan Rutim’s eyes.

Meeting his gaze head on, Lem Dom nodded back, “Of course. That is why I wanted to bring up my feelings in advance. I may well act cold or curt towards them, but I want you to know that I have no intention of going against the will of the leading clan heads.”

“Hmm, you’re a puzzling one, aren’t you?” Dan Rutim chuckled. “But, well, I can’t say I hate straightforward folks like you. And if the opportunity presents itself, I’d love for you to someday discover the cuteness Tsuvai is hiding deep down!”

“You won’t find such a thing in me even if you turn me upside down and try to shake it out,” Tsvai grumbled with a pout.

Meanwhile, Yamiru Lea remained expressionless, seemingly deciding to ignore Lem Dom’s declaration.

“Well then, looks like it’s about time for us to say our goodbyes. Tsvai, Yamiru Lea, good work today,” I interjected before things got any more complicated.

It was then that Lem Dom’s black pupils turned my way. “Asuta of the Fa clan... If you don’t mind, could you allow me to accompany you to the Fa house?”

“Huh? But why?”

“I’ve come here to build up experience at manning the stove. With that in mind, wouldn’t receiving instructions directly from you prove to be the shortest path?” Lem Dom explained her reasoning with a smile. However, that thin grin felt more sarcastic than friendly.

“I don’t especially mind, but you’re a guest at the Ruu settlement, aren’t you?”

“Yes. I’ll return here on foot myself, so you needn’t worry. Or is there some sort of issue with that, Dan Rutim?”

“Hmm? No, I don’t think that should be a problem. Just make sure you get back by dinner so you can introduce yourself to the leading clan head Donda Ruu, all right?”

“Understood. Well then, I’m in your care, Asuta of the Fa Clan...”

“Right...”

I didn’t really get what was going on, but it seemed things had been decided. In any case, if she wanted to build up experience, then I’d give her as much of that as she pleased. After all, it was praiseworthy how she came all the way here to the Ruu settlement on her own to be instructed on how to man the stove.

Still, there was a bit of doubt remaining in my mind. And that was because

when it came to light that Lem Dom would be visiting the Ruu settlement, Yamiru Lea and Toor Deen had whispered to each other, “Was there really a woman so passionate about manning the stove up north?”

Still, she was kind and gentle toward Toor Deen. Maybe she awakened to a passion for cooking after eating the food at that banquet, I optimistically thought to myself.

“All right, we’ll be excusing ourselves. Good work today, everyone.”

After saying farewell to the Ruu women, Bartha, and Ama Min Rutim (who would be staying over until tomorrow morning), we stepped outside. As for Yamiru Lea and Tsvai, they were each heading back to their clans at roughly the same time.

As we walked around front together, Dan Rutim once more clapped his hands and proclaimed, “Oh, that’s right! I forgot something else important! Asuta, I’d like to have you man the Rutim stove four days from now, on the twenty-sixth of the black month. What do you say?”

“The Rutim stove? Of course I don’t mind, but what’s the occasion?”

“Well you see, it’s actually my birthday!” Leaning on his cane, Dan Rutim puffed out his potbelly. “From what I hear, you made wonderful meals for Lala and Tito Min Ruu’s birthdays! That’s why I wanted to ask you too!”

“Oh, I see. Happy birthday.”

“It’s too early to be saying that just yet! So do you accept the job?”

“Of course. I can’t see any reason to turn you down.”

We were set to do business on that day and the day after, but it would be doable if I economized my time a bit. That was exactly what I had done for Granny Tito Min’s birthday back in the ashen month, in fact.

“I owe you one! Now I’m even more excited for my birthday!” Dan Rutim proclaimed, his huge hand slapping me on the back. Despite him using enough strength that it felt like he’d pulverized my lungs, when I saw his smiling face I naturally grinned back. “Oh, right, Lem Dom, you can come along to my birthday banquet too if you want. The plan is to invite guests from all our

related clans, so the Ruu should be able to carry you there and back in their wagon.”

“I’m honored, Dan Rutim,” Lem Dom politely responded with a bow. She had a sort of arrogant air about her in general, but apparently that didn’t extend to when she was addressing Dan Rutim.

I also picked up something I couldn’t ignore in that exchange. Specifically, it seemed this birthday party for the head of a clan would be on a different scale than Lala Ruu’s.

“So you’ll be inviting guests from outside of the Ruu clan? Exactly how many people are we talking about here?”

“Oh, it won’t be all that many. It’ll be two each from the Ruu and the clans under them for twelve, then twenty-seven members of the Rutim to bring the total to just thirty-nine! Then adding you, Ai Fa, and Lem Dom in, I guess that’d make it forty-two,” Dan Rutim calculated, before his expression started to show a bit of worry. “Now that you mention it, for Lala and Tito Min Ruu’s birthdays, it would have been just the members of the main house, right? Do the numbers make it a bit tricky?”

“No, I think if I ask a couple Ruu women to help out, we should be able to manage.”

“I see! In that case, I’m counting on you! Gazraan’s definitely been wanting to see you too.”

I hadn’t seen Gazraan Rutim at all over the course of the past month. Though I had heard he was doing well through Ama Min Rutim, I was definitely starting to miss him at this point.

“Well then, I’ll be looking forward to it!” he continued. “Let Ama Min know about any ingredients you’ll need!”

With one last hearty blow to my back, Dan Rutim got up atop his own tolos, Mim Cha, who had been tied up in front of the house. He really did move smoothly for someone with an injured ankle.

“You can hop on too, Tsuvai! There’s still work to handle back home, after all!”

“Stop bugging me about that. I don’t like how the tolos sways.”

“Stop complaining! You should learn the joy of feeling the breeze blowing past you on a tolos’s back!”

With that, Dan Rutim snatched her up by the nape of her neck and sat her atop the giant bird. “Take care, you guys!” he shouted before disappearing like the wind.

“Err... Could you go ahead and get in the wagon, Lem Dom? And I have a bit of business with the Sudra clan, so we’ll be making a stop there on the way.”

“Of course. Do as you please,” she nodded, climbing into the wagon. Li Sudra and Toor Deen followed, leaving just me and Yamiru Lea standing there.

As I untied Gilulu from a nearby tree and fixed him to the wagon, Yamiru Lea gently slid in close.

“Asuta, you should exercise at least a modicum of caution when it comes to Lem Dom.”

“Huh? Why’s that?”

“Gulaf Zaza is coming to respect your strength, and I don’t expect the clans from up north would employ an underhanded sneak attack, so I wouldn’t assume she was sent here with wicked intentions. But I also don’t believe that woman is as passionate about manning the stove as she claims...”

“So you think she could mean some sort of harm for her own personal reasons?”

“It may not be something quite that terrible. But don’t you agree that it’s important to remain on guard against someone hiding their true intentions?” Yamiru Lea asked with an unamused grin. “I don’t believe she’s accustomed to lying or hiding her feelings. As a natural-born liar myself, I can tell quite clearly that she is pretending.”

“I think I’d rather say that you’re just really perceptive. There’s no need to put yourself down like that.”

“I believe it’s more that you think too highly of Tsuvai and myself. We’re not as pure and innocent as the members of the Ruu and Rutim, you know.”

“Yeah, but innocence isn’t everything. Even if it’s as you say, I still like you and Tsvai and care about the two of you.”

She made an expression like she was holding herself back from clicking her tongue, and instead brushed aside her complexly woven hair.

“Exchanging words with you is quite tiring, Asuta. At any rate, at least take care that you don’t find yourself in trouble.”

“Thank you. Here’s to working with you again tomorrow, Yamiru Lea.”

As Yamiru Lea gracefully walked off on her own, I hopped up into the driver’s seat.

It was true that I couldn’t possibly tell what this Lem Dom woman was truly thinking, but I didn’t want to believe she was the sort of person who could do me or Ai Fa harm. Though her elder brother Deek Dom had an intimidating appearance, he was a man who stood alongside us during that incident at the meeting with Cyclopeus.

Now that I think about it, just how old is Deek Dom anyway? Maybe they’re siblings separated as far as Jiza and Rimee Ruu?

As my thoughts took that peaceful turn, I got the wagon moving.



Our first stop was the Sudra settlement.

It was located roughly a ten-minute or so walk away from the Fa house. Although it wasn’t quite as close as the Fou or Ran, I still classified them as neighbors.

As of late, dropping Li Sudra off on the way back from the Ruu settlement had been part of the daily routine, plus for today I needed to meet with the girl who would be replacing her too.

“Ah, thank you for coming all this way, Asuta,” the Sudra clan head himself greeted me when we arrived.

Had he just returned from hunting? I saw other men carrying a giba dangling from a pole around to the rear of the house.

“Did Li already tell you everything? I’m ashamed to have to ask you to let another woman take over her job for such a reason.”

The middle-aged Sudra clan head was the smallest hunter I knew. He might have been even shorter than Reina Ruu, and his limbs and torso were all extremely thin. His dark brown hair was unruly and disheveled, and he had a wrinkly face.

I felt like the man had a sort of strength about him that was hard to describe, though. It had been his idea that the Fou and Beim clan heads should participate in the meetings held by the leading clan heads as representatives for the smaller clans. And just the other day, he had proposed that nearby clans should line up their break periods even if they didn’t have blood ties. Ultimately, both of those ideas were adopted.

Going even further back, he came out in firm support of the Fa clan’s actions at the clan head meeting, and was the most positive about the idea of learning bloodletting, dissection, and cooking techniques.

I even owed him my life. Back when I was taken hostage by Tei Suun, it was this man who had struck the blow that saved me. Though we hadn’t had much of a chance to see him lately, he was an important person to both me and Ai Fa.

As I tucked those thoughts away in the corner of my mind, I nodded back, “Right. I really am grateful that Li Sudra has thought far enough ahead to consider what needs to be done after she steps down. Oh, right, and congratulations.”

“Cut it out. I’m not used to people saying stuff like that to my face,” he shot back with a frown, his already wrinkly forehead wrinkling even further. However, it had turned a dark red around the edges of his eyes. “Besides, loaning you women earns us coins. We’re the ones who should be thanking you.”

“No, the Fou and Ran seem to have trouble making enough time for the task, so it really is a big help. Plus, you help out by supplying meat too, so if anything I haven’t been thanking you enough.”

The Sudra clan head really had been very supportive on that front too. From the end of the blue month till midway through the white month the Ruu and

the clans under them were on a break period, which left us without a source of meat for our business in the meantime. Then the Fa, Fou, and Sudra had their break period in the following ashen month, which left me worrying a lot about where I was going to get meat from.

At the clan head meeting, the majority of the clans gave their approval for the Fa clan's business. But of those clans, only the Fou, Ran, Sudra, Gaaz, and Ratsu had learned bloodletting and dissection techniques. Then later on the Deen and Liddo from under the Zaza added to that number, but they were located close enough to each other as well that their break periods ended up overlapping.

From that group, the Gaaz and Ratsu were fairly distant from the rest, so their break periods weren't so close to the others. But precisely because they were so far away, Ai Fa hadn't had much of a chance to give them instructions, which meant they were still inexperienced when it came to bloodletting and dissecting. Their level of skill at least provided enough for them to eat, but they weren't well equipped to offer up extra to sell.

It was then that the Sudra clan head got in contact with the Fou and Ran and they worked together to more properly instruct the Gaaz, Ratsu, and their related clans on the necessary techniques. During the break period in the ashen month, they went out of their way to accompany those clans into the forest to carefully instruct them. Thanks to the meat those clans ended up providing in turn, we were able to keep on doing business in the post town even during the break period.

"But we've received even more from the Fa clan. So again, I really should be the one thanking you," the Sudra clan head stubbornly insisted. "We've amassed a fortune of our own through Li's work and by selling you meat. Thanks to that, we will no longer have to watch our infants go hungry... Asuta, I have lost children twice now to starvation."

"Yes, I remember, of course."

That was why the Sudra offered stronger support than anyone to the Fa clan's goal of bringing prosperity to the forest's edge. I could still clearly remember how when he cut down Tei Suun, he calmly stated, "Your Suun clan cast aside their pride to live without hardship, so what would you know of the pain of

losing your child to starvation?”

“This time, we’ll be certain to raise a fine child. And it’s thanks to the Fa clan that I can look forward to it filled with hope rather than despair.”

As the clan head said that, Li Sudra smiled gently next to him. Despite the fact that they seemed more like father and child in terms of age, seeing them standing beside one another like that made it clear just how much love they shared.

It was then that a voice loudly exclaimed “Ah!” Looking that way, I found a young girl coming from beside the Sudra house, holding chopped firewood in her arms.

“Oh, perfect timing. Come over here and introduce yourself to Asuta, Yun. Asuta, this is Yun Sudra, the girl we want to have help you with work in the post town.”

After setting the firewood down at her feet, she timidly approached. She was a cute girl with gray-brown hair, a color rarer than even black at the forest’s edge, and she wore it in a ponytail out to the side. And she definitely had to be younger than me. She had a small build and pretty looks, with large bright eyes and slightly narrow lips.



This Yun Sudra girl had visited the Fa house plenty of times for cooking lessons. But we hadn't had much in the way of one-on-one interaction, so the only strong impression I really had came from her unique hair color.

"U-Um, my name is Yun Sudra. I don't know if I'll be all that much help, but I look forward to working together," she stated, her face beet red as she gave a deep bow. She was obviously quite nervous, but still, she seemed to be a healthy, energetic young girl.

"I'm Asuta of the Fa clan, and I look forward to working with you too. Err...will you be able to start working right away tomorrow?"

"Ah, if that's what you need from her, then by all means. You can pay her based on how well she gets the work done," the girl's clan head offered.

"But from what I recall, the Sudra only have five women, right? Is it really okay for me to be taking two of them away?"

"Don't worry, us men will take care of whatever we need to. We've gained enough strength through the power of delicious cooking to handle that much," the middle-aged man declared resolutely, though his face still looked a bit sullen. "And if this girl isn't handling things properly, then please speak up about it. We would want to replace her with someone else while Li can still move about freely."

"I-I'll definitely be a big help! I swear, I won't bring shame to the Sudra name!" Yun Sudra declared, shooting me an enthusiastic look.

It was quite a contrast compared to the calm and composed Li Sudra, but I was definitely glad to see her so fired up.

"I don't believe she should fall that far short of Li in regards to manning the stove. If you don't mind, could you bring Yun along with you today so she can see you work?"

"Got it. I just have to get her back before sunset, right? Is that okay with you, Yun Sudra?"

"Of course! I'm grateful for the opportunity!" Yun Sudra replied as she once again bowed deeply, then she hopped on into the wagon as if to escape my

gaze.

“Okay, I’ll take good care of her. By the way, umm... I’ve been meaning to ask for a while now, but there’s something I’ve never quite happened to pick up...”

“Yes? What is it?”

“The truth is, I’ve actually never heard your name, clan head of the Sudra...”

At that, the Sudra clan head’s eyes opened wide. And then, his face wrinkled up even further as he grinned.

“Oh, I’ve never told you my name before?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“I see. Well, it’s not like you need to know someone’s name to form a bond with them or anything, I suppose. Now that you mention it, I don’t believe I’ve ever heard the Fou or Ran clan heads’ names either,” he replied, scratching his head. “Still, it’s a strange feeling to be introducing myself after all this time... My name is Raielfam Sudra.”

“Huh? Sorry, could you say that again?”

“Raielfam Sudra. It’s a real old-fashioned name, isn’t it?”

“I-Is it? At any rate, I’ve never heard such a long name here at the forest’s edge before.”

“Supposedly such names weren’t all that rare back in my grandfather’s day. They say we people of the forest’s edge have mixed blood from the east, so maybe that tradition came from there.”

It was true that the members of the Silver Vase like Shumiral and Radajid had complex family names I had difficulty memorizing.

“I don’t remember too clearly, but I believe it means something like ‘fangs of the fierce apes.’ Supposedly our ancestors hunted creatures called black apes back in the forest to the south, so I believe my name contains the wish that I would grow to be a strong hunter. That’s why I take this name given to me by my grandfather as a point of pride.”

“Right. It’s a wonderful name. From now on, that’s how I’ll refer to you,

Raielfam Sudra.”

“Very well. I hope to continue fostering a strong bond with your Fa clan from here on out, Asuta.”

At that, Raielfam Sudra’s already wrinkled face grew even more wrinkly as he broke out in a smile.

4

When we arrived at the Fa house, Toor Deen swiftly departed back for her clan, stating, “I stayed late yesterday, so I have to hurry back today.”

That just left me, Lem Dom, and Yun Sudra.

Though I wasn’t all that familiar with Yun Sudra, we were at least technically acquainted. And so, I figured it was at least better than being left alone with Lem Dom, who felt oddly overpowering even before that warning from Yamiru Lea not to let my guard down. I went ahead and started preparing dinner.

“Err, I wasn’t planning on making anything too complicated today, but up in the northern settlement you’re still making the same meals as before, right, Lem Dom?”

“Yes. There are plenty of folks who at least want to learn how to bake poitan as soon as possible,” Lem Dom replied, crossing her arms under her prominent chest as she stared down at me with a cynical look. “Even so, just learning bloodletting from the Rutim men has made for quite a change in terms of dinner. You brought that technique to the forest’s edge too, didn’t you?”

“I did. But it’s nothing special, and I would say that everyone does it in town.”

Lem Dom’s eyes narrowed suspiciously.

“Asuta, how old are you?”

“Huh? I’m seventeen.”

“I see. That means you’re two years older than me, so could you please stop sounding so formal when talking to me?”

I had figured she might be younger, but she was only fifteen? It was a bit of a

shock, hearing she was the same age as Ludo Ruu and Morun Rutim.

“Err, so how old are you, Yun Sudra?”

“A-Ah, I’m also fifteen!”

I looked back and forth between the pair in utter disbelief. Yun Sudra couldn’t have been more than 160 centimeters tall at the most and had an adorable girlish appearance, while Lem Dom looked to be around 180 centimeters and was burlier than I was. The pair was just so dissimilar that they felt like different species entirely.

“I suppose you’re right, I shouldn’t be treating you differently in that case. So one more time, nice to meet you, Lem Dom.”

“Yes, I feel the same.”

Even now that everyone but Yun Sudra was gone, Lem Dom still had the same arrogant aura lingering about her.

It wasn’t like I thought she was a bad person or anything, but it was my first time meeting a woman of the forest’s edge like her besides Yamiru Lea, which put me on edge. Still, it wasn’t as if I had any choice but to ignore that and keep on working.

“Well then, let’s get to work on dinner. First up is preparing the soup dish.”

The first step there was removing the astringent taste of the nanaar. Since the spinach-like vegetable had a strong bitter taste and squeaky texture when eaten raw, it needed that sort of extra effort. Still, it wasn’t all that major of a task. It just involved boiling it a bit in water with salt, then chilling it in cold water. Next I chopped up that blanched nanaar with aria, nenon, and chatchi, which I slowly boiled along with giba thigh meat in a somewhat low amount of water.

“If you boil giba meat over a low flame for a longer period of time, the meat gets softer and more flavor seeps into the broth. And the cloudy stuff that comes out of the meat and vegetables can end up as an off-flavor, which is why we remove it in advance.”

Since Lem Dom was still just a beginner, I was trying to give detailed

explanations as I worked. And though she must have already understood this much, Yun Sudra was passionately nodding along as I worked.

“Now we maintain a low flame while making sure it doesn’t go out, and meanwhile we’ll bake the poitan on the neighboring stove. In the Sudra clan, do you mix in gigo with the poitan?”

“W-We don’t! The clan head’s decision on the matter was that we didn’t need such expensive vegetables!”

“I see. It’s true that the price of gigo is no joke if you’re using it every day... Lately here at the Fa house, we’ve been mixing in fuwano rather than gigo.”

“Fuwano? You mean that flour that’s like poitan after you boil it and dry it out?”

“Yeah. By mixing it into poitan, it changes the texture, so I’ve been trying out all sorts of stuff. And it would definitely be cheaper than gigo.”

I was secretly thinking I could make something pretty interesting by combining the chewiness of poitan with the springy texture of fuwano. But that was something I was still experimenting with, so for today I just baked them up flat like usual.

“Now it’s finally time for the meat dish. This one uses aria, nenon, pula, and giba chest meat.”

The dish in question was made with tarapa-flavored sweet and sour sauce.

After thoroughly sauteeing the meat and vegetables, I finished things off by pouring a sweet and sour sauce over it, made using mamaria vinegar, sugar, tau oil, tarapa, and aria, with added chatchi starch to thicken it up. There was still plenty of time left till sunset, so I went ahead and cooked up enough for a sample and held it out for the two chefs-in-training.

“What do you think? I kept down the sourness, so it shouldn’t be so hard to get down.”

Yun Sudra timidly reached out, while Lem Dom showed no hesitation whatsoever.

“Ah, it’s delicious. Your skill is always so amazing, Asuta,” Yun Sudra stated

after eating her single bite. Her smooth cheeks had turned red, and her light brown eyes were tearing up ever so slightly. “Sugar really is a wonderful ingredient. The members of my house are always warning me not to use too much, since it costs more than salt.”

“Ah, you like sweet flavors, Yun Sudra?”

“Yes, I love them,” she smiled, her cheeks still red. I secretly thought to myself how this was a fresh sort of reaction from a woman of the forest’s edge.

As that was going on, Lem Dom mumbled, “What an odd taste. The dishes Toor Deen made didn’t taste anything like it. I think I may prefer just sprinkling salt and pico leaves over the meat instead.”

“Yeah, the sweetness from sugar and sourness of vinegar were unheard of at the forest’s edge up till now. I’m sure there are still plenty of folks out there who aren’t especially familiar with either.”

Fortunately Ai Fa didn’t seem to have much of a problem with sugar or vinegar right from the start, so I was able to ask her opinion on all sorts of things. In fact, when I made her sweet and sour meatballs before, it seemed to really put her in a good mood.

“By the way, I’ve heard people say that the folks from the northern settlement live even simpler lives than most people of the forest’s edge. Do they have a resistance to the idea of buying herbs and seasonings?”

“By ‘simple,’ do you mean how we don’t like to waste coins? If it is determined that delicious food is something we need as a people, then there’s no need to be stingy. After all, our clans should be the next most prosperous after the Ruu,” Lem Dom replied, and then she shot Yun Sudra a glance. “But from what I hear, the Sudra clan has earned quite the fortune assisting the Fa and selling them meat, correct? It really feels strange to think that small clans who can’t hunt many giba at all can earn more than the large clans up north.”

“That’s right. There are only nine members to the Sudra clan, so as long as the men hunt down one giba a day we can manage to keep going. But thanks to the Fa clan, we have been able to gain great strength,” Yun Sudra replied, showing no fear of Lem Dom as her eyes sparkled away. “In fact, lately the men haven’t been getting injured, and it’s not rare at all for them to hunt down three giba

every two days. Plus, Li is now with child, so I'm certain our clan will only grow stronger in the future."

"Now that you mention it, the Sudra no longer have any branch houses or related clans, right? So are you Li Sudra's little sister, then?" I asked, only for Yun Sudra's cheeks to instantly flush red. But what she said next spoke to the harsh conditions of the forest's edge.

"No. Li was originally a member of a branch house, while I come from the Meema, a clan that once followed the Sudra. Once it seemed like our houses were about to fall into ruin, we were taken into the main Sudra house, which somehow managed to survive. Otherwise, our only option would have been to abandon the Sudra name and live on as members of some other clan we had no blood ties with."

"I see..."

To the people of the forest's edge, blood ties mattered above all else. And so, both the clans that were prospering and those that were struggling felt like extremes to me.

For example, the Ruu and the former Suun were both large groups with a hundred people to their name when including the clans under them. Among them, the Ruu and Suun, as the parent clans, each had thirty to forty people each, while the smallest clans under them didn't even reach ten in number.

With more subordinate clans, that allowed for maintaining strength through marriages, but smaller clans would end up dwindling and having to consolidate in the end like the Sudra had done.

From my point of view, it would be better to intermingle between clans much more frequently and form even further blood ties...but things weren't quite that simple. After all, to the people of the forest's edge, forming such bonds meant becoming family. If you couldn't treat someone as equally important to you as your parents and siblings and risk your life for them, then you couldn't go forming ties of blood.

And I had come to think that way too when I saw how the Ruu had gained such strength, while the Suun neglected those bonds and fell into decline.

“Still, the Fa are the only clan here at the forest’s edge with just two members to their name,” Lem Dom stated in a sarcastic tone. “Our main Dom house is also just myself and the clan head, but when you add in the branch houses we number fifteen in total. And there are nearly seventy in total under our parent clan, the Zaza. Would you not say a clan of just two like the Fa are simply awaiting the day of their inevitable ruin?”

“But the Fa clan can grow by taking in a husband or bride! By forming blood ties with other clans like that, they could avoid their ruin!” Yun Sudra firmly insisted before I could say anything.

When I looked her way in surprise, I found that the girl was squaring her shoulders and glaring right at Lem Dom. It was sort of like a toy poodle facing down a doberman.

“That’s true... The Fa clan has earned an enormous fortune, so they should be able to use that strength to gain new blood ties,” Lem Dom replied, not looking at all intimidated as she shrugged her shoulders. “It’s not as if I was trying to make light of the Fa clan, you know. I have no intention of critiquing how other clans live... If I touched a nerve, then I apologize, Asuta.”

“If that’s the case, then it’s no issue. Do you mind backing down too, Yun Sudra?” I asked, causing the girl to swiftly turn toward me. Once again, her face turned beet red.

“I-I’m so sorry! That was uncalled for... I’m so embarrassed...”

“Nah, don’t worry about it,” I replied, though I was feeling at a bit of a loss myself.

Maybe it was weighing a bit heavily on my nerves, having to deal with both the oddly sarcastic-sounding Lem Dom and also Yun Sudra, who acted overly defensive of the Fa clan. When it came to the future of our clan, I really didn’t want outsiders to interfere too much.

“Now then, how about we continue working on the soup dish?” I declared as I picked up a container left on the workstation, trying to focus on the task at hand. It contained skim milk, which I had produced the other day while making milk fat. And so, I went ahead and poured the entire contents into the pot.

“Ah, so is that karon milk?”

“Yeah. I end up with this stuff left over when I make milk fat, so I have to make frequent use of it.”

The soup had grown cloudy from the stock and was now a distinctly milky color. Taking care not to let it boil, I added salt and pico leaves, as well as just a bit of tau oil. Then, I finished things off by adding poitan for a bit of gooeyness.

This dish was something like a simplified cream stew. Normally I would have used milk fat and fuwano flour to make a white sauce, but that would leave me with more skim milk from making the milk fat and I’d end up going around in circles.

“So the Sudra clan hasn’t been ordering karon milk, right? Have you ever given this dish a taste test before?”

“Yes, but only once... Ah, but if you don’t mind, could I give it a try again today?”

“Of course, go right ahead.”

After scooping out some karon milk soup onto plates, I held them out to the two women.

It didn’t look much different than cream stew, and it had a nice gooey texture. But I hadn’t used any milk fat and had even used skim karon milk, so it had a rather refreshing feel to it. For an accent, I had added pico leaves, which were akin to black pepper. That all made it pretty much identical to the recipe I had given The Kimyuus’s Tail and The Westerly Wind.

“Aah, this one is delicious too,” Yun Sudra proclaimed with a look of supreme bliss, while Lem Dom raised a single questioning eyebrow.

“You used milk from the animal known as a karon in this?”

“That’s right. Do you like it?”

“Yes. It somehow feels like this flavor is granting me strength.”

Apparently Lem Dom possessed her own particular tastes. If you wanted to take that in a negative light, you could call her a picky eater, but it was also possible to see it as her having a good tongue for knowing her likes and dislikes.

Folks like her can actually be better at cooking, ironically, I thought to myself as Yun Sudra started looking back and forth between the pots.

“Umm... That meat dish is red like a tarapa, while this soup is white like karon milk... Those colors are real pretty, aren’t they?”

“That’s right. Appearances are important too when it comes to cooking.”

“Plus, it feels like the sourness from the tarapa and the sweetness of the karon milk help each other stand out.”

“Yes, the sourness of the mamaria vinegar on its own would probably clash with the taste of the karon soup, which is why I used lots of tarapa.”

I was surprised by how keenly she had pointed that out.

In response, Yun Sudra was smiling like a puppy having its head petted.

It was then that I heard the sound of footsteps on sand.

“Ah, welcome home, Ai Fa... Wait, what happened to you?!” I shouted without thinking when I saw her.

“What are you talking about?” Ai Fa shot back with a displeased look.

I was shocked she even needed to ask, considering how out of the ordinary her appearance was. Her hair was normally worn up in a complex braid, but now it was all disheveled and both her cloak and limbs were coated in dirt. Her mouth even looked to be a bit bloody.

However, she still had a firm stance and a piercing look in her eyes. That much was why I was able to hold back the unease I was feeling.

“Two giba came at me at once in an attack from two sides. I took down one of them, but the other slipped away. And I drove my blade in at an odd angle too, which is how it ended up like this,” Ai Fa explained, pulling out her sword.

At that point, I once again gasped. Her blade had been cleanly snapped off around the middle.

“The giba I managed to take down ended up with too many wounds and I wasn’t able to properly bloodlet it, so I let the Fou clan have the meat and pelt.”

“I see... I’m just glad you weren’t seriously hurt.”

“Hmph. I got some slight injuries, though,” Ai Fa retorted with a wild spit.

Actually, that wasn’t spit that came out, but blood. Apparently she had cut not just her lips, but also the inside of her mouth.

“Asuta, you didn’t use any chitt seeds in tonight’s dinner, did you?”

“N-No, at least not yet.”

“In that case, make certain not to put any in. It would be a real mess trying to eat chitt seeds with my mouth like this.”

I felt truly glad that I had taken care of experimenting with the giba curry back at the study session.

At any rate, in the midst of all this Ai Fa’s displeased gaze moved over to my side.

“By the way, you are a Dom woman, are you not? Weren’t you supposed to be receiving instruction at the Ruu settlement?”

“Yes... I’m surprised you knew I belonged to the Dom clan, Ai Fa of the Fa clan.”

I turned toward Lem Dom in surprise, as something had clearly changed in her voice compared to before.

With a strangely passionate look in her eyes, Lem Dom stared right at Ai Fa, and then she broke out in an oddly daring grin.

“The Dom are the only clan at the forest’s edge to use giba bones as accessories like that. And I had heard from Asuta that a Dom woman was coming to the Ruu settlement. So why are you here at the Fa house receiving instruction from Asuta?”

“I wanted to meet you, Ai Fa.”

This was news to me.

Ai Fa’s eyes narrowed in suspicion as she used her fingers to comb out her disheveled hair. Since it was no longer tied up, those long golden locks flowed all the way down her back and over her chest.

“I don’t know what business you may have, but I’m in quite the bad mood

today. If it's anything complicated, I ask you to come back some other day."

"You truly are beautiful, Ai Fa... I had heard you weren't an especially large woman, and it's not as if you have prominent muscles... If it weren't for that look in your eyes, you would be even more lovely than most women."

"Did you come here just to babble nonsense, Dom woman?"

"My name is Lem Dom. Younger sister of the Dom clan head, Deek Dom. I came here to meet you, the only female hunter at the forest's edge," Lem Dom said with a sensual lick of her lips. It was as if she were a carnivore that had found its prey.

"Hmph, you seem to have trained your body quite a bit for a woman, Lem Dom. Are you in charge of some sort of intense manual labor at the Dom settlement?"

"Oh, you think so? Well it's true that if we stood next to each other, I could see anyone thinking I was the hunter."

With an indifferent expression, Ai Fa started bundling up her loose hair.

Meanwhile, Yun Sudra and I just watched over the uneasy exchange.

"There are men out there who are smaller than me but possess greater strength. Frustrating as it may be, there's a gap between men and women on that front to begin with. But if we're both women, then the bigger one should be stronger, wouldn't you agree?"

"It's true that with such a fine build you may be able to carry heavier things about. But what of it? I don't understand what you're trying to say in the least."

"It's nothing all that complicated. I simply wish for a contest with you."

"A contest?"

"Yes, a contest of strength between hunters," Lem Dom replied with an even more daring grin.

But instantly Ai Fa seemed to lose all interest as she looked away from Lem Dom. "Ridiculous. I have no time to spend on such a farce. Asuta, I'll be cleansing myself inside the house, so don't enter for the time being."

“Hold on, Ai Fa. You may not have any interest in it, but to me this is an important event that will determine my future,” Lem Dom stated, her bone accessories jangling as she stepped forward.

Ai Fa then shot her an annoyed glare out of the corner of her eye.

“What is there to gain from a contest of strength between a woman and a hunter? Such deeds are meant to display one’s strength to the forest, or as an act of training.”

“That *is* the reason. This is a chance to show the forest my strength, and to train as a hunter,” Lem Dom replied, her lips twisting into a grin. “You’ve managed to take down enough giba to prove yourself a fine hunter, haven’t you? So if I prove myself stronger than you, then wouldn’t that mean I have a hunter’s strength myself?”

“Your words may be correct, but a woman who is no hunter would never get the better of me...”

“How can you say that so confidently? Despite what you might think, I’ve done plenty of training in my own way.”

“Among the women who aren’t hunters, there might not be any who are a match for you. And it’s possible you could even take down most men from town. But that’s the end of it. You wouldn’t be able to do a thing against a full-fledged hunter.”

“I came here to have a contest of strength, not an argument, Ai Fa.”

“You certainly are stubborn,” Ai Fa grumbled. “As I said, I’m in a bad mood today. If you don’t wish to suffer a painful experience, then go back to manning the—” Ai Fa started to reply, only for Lem Dom to make a sudden move.

Kicking off the ground, she closed the three-meter gap between her and Ai Fa in an instant.

Yun Sudra shrieked, clinging to my arm.

Showing no panic whatsoever, Ai Fa twisted her body and dodged Lem Dom’s assault.

With animal-like agility, Lem Dom once more pivoted to face Ai Fa.

“I guess it’s no surprise that that wasn’t enough to make you flinch. But can’t you tell I’m no ordinary woman now?”

“It seems you won’t understand without getting hurt...” Ai Fa stated in an utterly unmoved tone, calmly removing her hunter’s cloak. And keeping her gaze fixed on Lem Dom, she hung it on a nearby tree branch.

“P-Please stop, Lem Dom! It’s not acceptable for us people of the forest’s edge to fight among ourselves!” Yun Sudra firmly interjected. However, she was still clinging to my left arm.

“This isn’t a fight, it’s a hunter’s contest of strength. We aren’t to hurt one another, and victory comes from your opponent’s palms or the back of their legs touching the ground. That’s fine with you, right, Ai Fa?”

“Indeed. Aside from the fact that you’re no hunter, none of that is mistaken.”

As soon as Ai Fa offered that response, Lem Dom went on the attack again. Her long arms reached out, trying to grab my clan head from both sides.

Ai Fa gracefully stepped forward, letting the attack flow over her left side. And then she grabbed hold of Lem Dom’s left wrist.

Using all her might, Lem Dom tried to twist her body to shake free.

Ai Fa leapt back as if being thrown, her right heel brushing up against the stove built into the ground.

The fire was already out, but there was still a hot pot sitting on it. Whether she noticed that or not, Lem Dom leapt forward again for the third time.

“Aah!” Yun Sudra shrieked. If Ai Fa dodged, Lem Dom would definitely plunge into the stove. Even I was about to reflexively close my eyes.

Sure enough, though, Ai Fa wasn’t shaken. She didn’t try to dodge Lem Dom’s charge either. My clan head ducked down and let Lem Dom’s arms pass over her head, then grappled her tight waist and twisted her body to the right.

Lem Dom’s frame was lifted into the air as if weightless, passing just beside the stove as her back slammed into the ground.

For just a moment Ai Fa’s posture was a back bridge, then she more or less did a backward somersault and landed on her feet. She might have just been

using Lem Dom's momentum, but it came out like a showy pro wrestling move.

"Are you satisfied now? What a truly foolish woman..." Ai Fa stated, turning to shoot us a glare. "By the way, you are a Sudra woman, correct? It's against the customs of the forest's edge for an unmarried woman to cling to a member of another clan like that."

"Huh?" I questioned doofily, only for Yun Sudra to leap away from me. And as she did so, her face was redder than ever before.

"I-I-I'm so sorry! I-I acted without thinking..."

"Ah, er, yeah," I unintelligibly responded, then I looked over beyond the stove. Instantly, Lem Dom energetically rose to her feet.

"Just what I'd expect from a full-fledged hunter! I never thought you would handle me so easily!" Even now, there was a daring smile on her face, and her black eyes were blazing like a hunter's. "I won't be giving up from just that single bout, though, Ai Fa!"

"If that one clash was not enough for you to understand the difference in our strength, then I cannot call you anything but unqualified to be a hunter."

"Hmph!" Lem Dom snorted, lowering her stance. It seemed that despite falling for that explosive pro wrestling move, she hadn't taken any real noteworthy damage.

Seeing that, Ai Fa narrowed her eyes, looking displeased. "If you want to suffer further, then let's move elsewhere. After all, what if dirt or the like got into the food?"

"Ha ha ha, so you're finally ready to seriously take me on? I'm glad to hear it, Ai Fa."

"Today really has been an awful day..." Ai Fa muttered, brushing up her bangs as she let out a long-suffering sigh.



Several minutes later, I heard the sound of a totos's talons beating the ground coming toward the Fa house.

"Hey, long time no see, Asuta!"

“Huh? Ah, Ludo Ruu.”

The energetic youngest son of the Ruu tugged up on the totos’s reins, bringing it to a halt. The huge bird’s plumage was a touch on the pale side, which meant this one was Ruuruu rather than Jidura.

“It’s been a little while, hasn’t it? So, what brings you here today?”

“Well, Vina and the others told me that Lem Dom headed to the Fa house, so I came to see what was going on.” As he hopped nimbly to the ground, he looked over at Yun Sudra by my side. “Hmm? Who are you?”

“I’m Yun Sudra of the Sudra clan,” the girl replied with a somewhat nervous look on her face, and then she bowed her head. It seemed like someone from such a small clan couldn’t just casually interact with a member of one of the leading houses of the forest’s edge.

“Hmm... I’m Ludo Ruu. Nice to meet you. So, where did Lem Dom get to?”

“She’s over that way,” I replied, pointing behind me, prompting Ludo Ruu to peer over my shoulder.

Lem Dom had both hands on the ground as she gasped for breath. Ai Fa, meanwhile, stood before her, seeming perfectly composed. Over the past few minutes, she had already easily thrown Lem Dom over ten times.

“Jeez, so that really is how things turned out, huh? I figured. That’s why I hurried here by totos...”

“Huh? You know Lem Dom, Ludo Ruu?”

“Yeah. Remember when you made the croquette sandwiches before? Well, I ended up spending the night at the main Dom house that day.”

Now that he mentioned it, I had made some croquette sandwiches for Ludo Ruu to bring along with him when he went to the northern settlement back in the ashen month.

“She told me that she wanted to become a hunter. I guessed that she might challenge Ai Fa to a contest of strength if they met.”

“I-If you knew, then I wish you would’ve told me. I had no idea what in the world was happening when she suddenly lunged at Ai Fa.”

“Well, I did think that maybe I should bring it up. I mean, she seemed super driven to become a hunter. But it also felt like it wasn’t really my place to say anything,” Ludo Ruu replied, looking guilty as he scratched his head. “Besides, I couldn’t imagine her ever being any threat to Ai Fa, no matter how hard she went on the attack.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s true, but still...”

Ai Fa had managed to take down powerful hunters like Ji Maam, Darmu Ruu, and Rau Lea, and even competed evenly with Dan Rutim, who was either the strongest or second strongest of the men under the Ruu. Even if she was a woman with an unusually robust build, it seemed there was no way Lem Dom could even make Ai Fa work up a sweat, much less bring her to the ground.

“You lack the resolve and spirit needed to be a hunter, Lem Dom...” Ai Fa coldly stated as she looked down at the woman’s powerless figure. “No matter how strong your body may be, you will never defeat your opponent without a powerful heart. And furthermore, if you lack the technique to utilize your strength, then it’s no use for anything but carrying heavy loads. The strongest person you could hope to compete with now is a young man who has yet to even enter the forest.”

Lem Dom offered no response.

“But that’s nothing to be ashamed of. You would be hard pressed to find anyone who wishes to see more women as hunters in the first place, so you should focus on the work that is yours to do, Lem Dom.”

As she again received no response, Ai Fa gave a little sigh and turned to walk away.

However, Lem Dom grabbed hold of her ankle.

“What is it? I can’t exactly throw someone who cannot even stand under their own power, you know.”

“Ai Fa, you’re...” Lem Dom squeezed out while gasping for air. “You’re an amazing hunter, aren’t you?”

“Hmm?” Ai Fa murmured, her brow furrowing questioningly. And then suddenly, Lem Dom threw her arms around my clan head’s graceful legs.

“I’m so glad I came here so we could meet... I want to become a fine hunter like you, Ai Fa...”

Lem Dom’s expression looked somehow ecstatic as she lay there on the ground, hugging Ai Fa’s legs.

After exchanging a glance with Ludo Ruu, I hurried over to them.

“Don’t utter such foolishness. You don’t understand at all just how much hardship there is in trying to be a hunter as a woman.”

“Even so, I want to be a hunter... I can’t just keep on suppressing these feelings, doing nothing at all with them...”

Lem Dom closed her eyes as she joyfully rubbed her cheek up against Ai Fa’s smooth thigh. It was at this point that Ai Fa’s cool-headed expression finally started to crack.

“Then just go ahead and do as you please! This has nothing to do with me to begin with! A-And could you stop touching me already?!”

“No, just let me stay like this a little longer...”

At that, Ai Fa shot us a look of uncharacteristic bewilderment. “What’s going on here?! Asuta, Ludo Ruu, save me already!”

“Hmm? It’s fine for women to touch one another even before marriage, isn’t it?” the woman on the ground opined.

“That’s not the issue here! I can feel a shiver running down my spine!”

Ai Fa tried to coldly shove the other girl’s head away, but Lem Dom just let out a seductive “Mmm” and refused to separate. For the first time, Lem Dom’s well-trained muscles had a chance to shine.



“What’s going on here?” Ludo Ruu questioned, looking my way as he scratched his head.

“I’m not really sure, but I think Ai Fa may have looked a little *too* cool there.”

Now that I thought about it, when Gilulu had first come to the Fa house, Ai Fa had earned some shrill cheers of excitement from women in the area as she rode around gallantly.

As I found myself lost in such recollections, Ai Fa woefully cried, “Hurry up and save me already!”

Chapter 2: Passing Days

1

It was now the following day, the twenty-third of the black month.

While we were working at the stalls, we ended up with an unusual customer: Diel, the daughter of a guy who led a group of steelworkers from the south.

“Hey there. It’s been a while, hasn’t it, Asuta?” the girl with short speckled hair said with a beaming smile as she approached the stall. Naturally, she was accompanied by her attendant Labis.

Cyclaeus had been an important business partner for them, but after losing him, her father’s group had been able to rework their deals with another representative of Duke Genos. Thanks to that, the leader of the group, Grannar, ended up triumphantly returning home with a massive order. However, Diel and Labis remained in the castle town along with two other members of the group to continue with whatever business dealings were necessary.

Then, if they got a new order, they were to send a fast totos back to their home country to inform their company. And at least for now, the plan was that a large group would be sent to Genos every six months or so once the goods were ready.

Even as he took on the job of supplying cooking implements to the restaurants that had been under Cyclaeus’s control, and making arms for the castle’s soldiers in near perpetuity, Diel’s father was also trying to expand his dealings further. He certainly did seem to be quite the motivated businessman.

“Yeah, has it been around ten days or so? I’m glad to see you looking well,” I replied, breaking out in a grin of my own in response to Diel’s earnest smile. Things had been up in the air between us until everything was settled with Cyclaeus, but since then we had gotten back to our usual relaxed relationship. And as she smiled even brighter, Diel looked over the line of stalls.

“What should I have today? I don’t get to the post town that often, so I never

know what to choose!”

“You like the giba manju, right? But I’m sure what you’re really after is the giba cutlet sandwich.”

“Of course it is! I’ve still only gotten it once!”

Still, I only saw her every five to ten days or so, so you could say she had a lot of luck to have drawn it even a single time.

As I thought about that, a figure approached from the thicket to the rear. And when she turned in that direction, Diel’s eyes opened wide.

“Oh? Why are you here? It’s real rare for you to come to town!”

It was Ai Fa. “I have a purchase I need to make today,” she replied.

She had come to town for what really was the first time in a good while in order to buy a replacement for the sword she broke yesterday. Though she had taken care of it first thing in the morning, she had taken the day off from hunting and was accompanying us instead. Apparently, in addition to the cut in her mouth, one of her back teeth felt loose, which supposedly made it so she couldn’t muster her full strength.

It really was a surprise that she had been able to toss Lem Dom around so easily in that state, but, well, there was definitely nothing wrong with taking it easy when you’re not feeling your best. Up until a little while ago she had been a touch drowsy from the romu leaves she was using to dull the pain, but she seemed to have her normal piercing gaze back as she stood facing Diel.

“Hmm, I see. It must be around two months now since I last saw you.”

“Indeed. We last met when I visited the Turan manor to retrieve Asuta,” Ai Fa replied, giving a gentle bow of her head. “It has been bothering me ever since that I have been unable to thank you properly. I owe a great deal to your quick-wittedness that night, so I thank you from the depths of my heart.”

“Quick-wittedness? What do you mean?”

“You recognized me, and yet you stayed quiet. Furthermore, you casually hinted at Asuta’s presence, and I sensed that you tried to steer the conversation in a desirable direction.”

Naturally, they were talking about back when Ai Fa rescued me from the Turan manor. She had pretended to be the daughter of a wealthy merchant from Sym in order to infiltrate a dinner there, where Diel also happened to be present. And of course, Diel had been familiar with Ai Fa before that. But thanks to her not revealing my clan head's identity, I was able to be saved.

"But, I mean... I wasn't able to do anything up till then, so I really don't think you should be thanking me at all..." Diel replied with a pained look.

In response, Ai Fa shook her head, "No, at that time you had no reason at all to risk earning the resentment of the house of Turan. That is why I must offer my gratitude for lending your aid to Asuta and us people of the forest's edge in spite of that."

"You're overblowing things! I don't even know how to respond when you go acting all humble like that!"

"I'm not especially seeking any sort of response... Still, I suppose I don't mind forgetting your unwarranted attack on Asuta in return."

"Hey, don't go digging up ancient history. I forgot all about that ages ago," Diel said with an awkward grin, ruffling her short hair. "Well, whatever. If that means we're good and even, then I'm honestly grateful."

"Right," Ai Fa nodded back, and then she stepped away.

As I breathed a sigh of relief, I picked up the wooden cylinder at my feet.

"Well then, please go ahead and draw a lot. If you're worrying about what to order, it makes sense to do that first, right?"

"That's true," Diel agreed as she casually pulled out a wooden stick. On its end there was a clear red mark. "Ah... I won."

"Congratulations. You've got a really good success rate going there, Diel," I noted as I got a giba cutlet sandwich from the box Toor Deen held out. "Here you go. That'll be three red coins."

"Eh heh heh," Diel joyfully chuckled as she accepted the item.

At that, Labis expressionlessly handed over the payment. Despite the fact that he was always accompanying Diel as a bodyguard, he had yet to eat any giba

meat.

“Oh, is that girl new?” Diel questioned, looking over at the neighboring stall.

Yun and Li Sudra were the ones running it. Though there was still time left till the sun would hit its peak, they had finished up their work back home and hurried on over.

“Yes, she’s new to the job, so she’s currently being trained. Be gentle with her, all right?”

“Hmm, she’s a cute one... Actually, every last woman from the forest’s edge I’ve seen has been a real beauty. Are you picking out girls like that on purpose, Asuta?”

“O-Of course not. I’ve just been taking charge of the chefs chosen by their clan heads.”

“Oh?” Diel murmured, glaring straight at me.

Fortunately, though, today I had a different topic prepared to pivot toward. “Actually, I’ve got something I’d like to ask you about, Diel.”

“Hmm? What is it?”

“Do you have any tools around this size and shape laying around in storage?”

“Huh? I don’t really get it; what shape are you asking about?”

“Err, so it would be like a tube that gets all thin like this at the tip, ideally.”

“Oh, do you mean a funnel?”

“A funnel! Yeah, that’s it! I’ve got a new dish I want to try, but I need one of those.”

Yesterday I had Nail introduce me to one of his customers from the east, who taught me how to make sausages. I wanted to have a firm grasp of the technique, seeing how Mikel had promised to visit the forest’s edge to give instruction on how to smoke meat.

“A funnel, huh? I don’t think we have any in storage, since folks don’t need to replace them very often,” Diel said after taking a bite of her giba cutlet sandwich. “They’re used to transfer wine and tau oil and the like from barrels

into bottles, aren't they? So you should be able to get something like that in the post town, I'd figure."

"Hmm, really? I tried looking for one at the metalwork places around town, but I didn't find any."

"In that case, want me to take a look at the shops in the castle town?"

"Ah, I have a go-between on that end already, so I'll ask them. You're always busy, aren't you?" I replied, right before the big boss of that go-between appeared to the north, riding in a huge boxed wagon drawn by two tolos.

Following my gaze, Diel went "Hmm?" with an adorable tilt of her head. "What's that about? It looks like it's got a noble's emblem on it."

"That has to be the son of Count Daleim. Ever since that dinner party in the castle town, he's been visiting our stalls all the time."

The tolos wagon stopped at the entrance to the post town, and two armed guards got down along with a plump noble. Unsurprisingly, it was indeed Polarth, the second son of the house of Daleim. The sudden appearance of a noble caused a real stir in the crowd passing by. After shooting a hearty grin all about as if to calm them, Polarth went ahead and approached my stall.

"Hello there. I'd like to once again make a purchase of your cooking, Sir Asuta."

"Thank you for your continued business. Would you like to draw a lot?"

"Of course I would! It's been half a month since I've drawn a winner, after all."

Normally he sent maids or pages to make his purchases for him, but when he had business with Yang's shop or the Daleim territory to handle, he would stop by personally like this along the way. And obviously, people took notice when he did. After all, it would normally be unimaginable for a noble to come all the way to the post town to buy a meal.

"Ah, a miss! Why must I be so terribly unlucky?!" Polarth proclaimed with a disappointed shrug of his shoulders, interrupting my thoughts. It seemed he had never even considered the idea of using his authority as a noble to have me

specially prepare giba cutlet sandwiches for him. “The giba cutlet sandwich is the dish most to my tastes. Of course, that isn’t to say I find fault with your other dishes, but that flavor truly is something special...”

As he shared his lamentations with us, Polarth’s pained gaze fell upon Diel’s hands as she stood there beside the stall. And then he seemed to realize something, as his eyes shot wide open.

“Oh? Are you not the visitors from Jeland staying in the guest house?”

At that, Diel hurriedly swallowed, then placed her open hand over her stomach and bowed. “Yeah, hi... Oh, I mean, hello, I am Diel, the daughter of Grannar, the steelworker from Jeland, my lord.”

“Ah, never mind the formalities. It’s not as if we’re in the castle, after all. I am the second son of the house of Daleim, Polarth. If I recall correctly, didn’t you transfer from the guest house to an inn recently?”

“Yes. We are continuing our steelworking business from there.”

“Ah, I see. You seem to have some truly fine products. From what I hear, when the captain of the ducal guard inspected the example blade you provided, he declared that he found no fault with it.”

“That is a truly unexpected honor...”

It seemed that Diel was a whole lot better at knowing how to handle nobles than I was. Still, the fact that she was holding her partially-eaten giba cutlet sandwich in one hand the whole time was pretty cute.

After offering her a nod, Polarth turned and faced my way.

“By the way, Sir Asuta, I’ve come here today bearing words from Lord Genos.”

“Huh? What about, exactly?”

It was rare for the lord of the land himself, Duke Marstein Genos, to have a message delivered to someone like me. But as I secretly worried he was going to tell us to raise the price of giba meat again, Polarth explained with his earnest grin unwavering.

“Well you see, it seems there are visitors from Banarm coming again next month. However, this time it shall be a group of envoys.”

“Envoys? Then you mean...they’re trying to reforge those diplomatic relations that Cyclaeus disrupted around ten years ago?”

“I do not know that I would call it ‘diplomatic relations’ when both Genos and Banarm are territories of the Kingdom of Selva, but yes, that is essentially it. They are coming to discuss once more whether or not there can be trade of the fuwano and fruit wine and the like produced by our two towns.” His plump cheeks jiggled a bit as he smiled even wider. “It seems Sir Welhide is to lead the group, to follow his late father’s wishes. And from what I am told, he has requested to dine on your cooking again, Sir Asuta.”

“Huh? My cooking?”

“Indeed. It seems he is insisting on it. Presumably, Sir Welhide has had difficulty convincing the people of his hometown that giba cooking truly is delicious. No doubt he must be thinking, ‘Then I shall have you eat it yourselves!’”

Welhide was a young man who was part of an offshoot of the ducal house of Banarm. I had met him twice now, during the meeting when we faced off with Cyclaeus and Ciluel and at the banquet not too long after. As his father had been murdered by Zattsu Suun under Cyclaeus’s orders, Kamyua Yoshu had brought him along to serve as a witness.

Even though judgment had already been passed, he was still someone the people of the forest’s edge owed a debt of atonement. And in spite of that bad blood directed at our people, he had still happily eaten my giba cooking.

As I recalled Welhide’s clean-cut and serious-looking face in my head, I nodded back. “All right. I have some doubts about whether or not someone as inexperienced as me can handle such a big role...but I’ll consult with the leading clan heads of the forest’s edge on the matter.”

“Yes, please do so! Still, just like with last time, there’s no need to fixate so completely on giba cooking. As long as you can decisively show the deliciousness of giba through the meat dish for Sir Welhide’s sake, you should be able to do whatever you please with the rest.”

He said that, but it wasn’t as if I was all that skilled at handling karon or kimyuus meat. That is to say, I had no real confidence that I could make

something better than I could with giba if I tried using them. Though if my current experiments progressed well, then I could maybe use the somewhat interesting dish I was trying out that contained both fuwano and poitan.

“And I would imagine you can also use as much of the ingredients still overflowing in the Turan manor as you please. As I recall, I believe you have only ever set foot in the smaller kitchen, correct?”

“Yes, that’s right. But I definitely had no issue with the range of ingredients on offer there.”

“Ah, but the larger kitchen’s pantry is on an entirely different scale! That place is a treasure trove of ingredients Cyclaeus spent half of his life gathering, after all! I saw it for the first time just a short while ago myself, and it was truly a stunning sight!”

I recalled how Mikel had once called the place Cyclaeus’s treasure trove too. The ingredients flowing into the port town now were really nothing but the tip of the iceberg.

“What do you say? If it’s not too much trouble, you could perhaps take a look at the pantry beforehand. Why not bring any ingredients that look usable back to the forest’s edge and try to think up a new dish? Aah, the mere thought alone excites me!”

“Right... I’ll consult with the leading clan heads about all that too.”

“Perfect! And I shall discuss the matter with Duke Genos! Ah, and we couldn’t simply foist all the responsibility on you, so I am told our side shall also have an especially skilled chef participate.”

“An especially skilled chef?”

“That’s right. He was previously the head chef at the Turan manor and has since opened his own shop in the castle town: an extraordinary man by the name of Sir Varkas. In the past, he was counted as one of the three great chefs of Genos.”

“The three great chefs of Genos?” As I thought vaguely to myself how that was quite the grandiose nickname, Polarth continued on with a statement that caused me to catch my breath.

“Sir Varkas became the head chef of the Turan manor while another of the three took the same position with Genos Castle, and both are revered as being nearly without equal in their profession. From what I have heard, the third earned Cyclaeus’s displeasure and had his future as a chef cut off.”

I was dumbstruck.

“Hmm? Is something the matter?”

“Um, was...was that man named Mikel?”

“Ah yes, I believe that was it. Supposedly he is still living somewhere in Genos even now, but I do not know the details.”

“So that Varkas person is supposed to be as skilled as Mikel?”

“Indeed. Actually, in terms of reputation, I would say that Sir Varkas came out on top. After all, he is able to use such a great many ingredients so skillfully! I hear tell that at the time, Cyclaeus paid him an enormous sum in order to obtain his skills.”

I could feel a sort of heat gradually rising up in my chest.

Naturally, that Varkas person hadn’t done anything wrong. After all, if he had turned down Cyclaeus’s request, he might have met the same fate as Mikel.

It was hard to express just how I felt about the thought that people who were his peers back in the day were still famous even now, while Mikel alone was left burning charcoal outside of the castle town.

“Well then, be sure to give the leading clan heads my regards! After all, I intend to do whatever it takes to attend the banquet myself! I’ll be hoping for a positive response, Sir Asuta!”

2

When we returned to the Ruu settlement, we found Lem Dom awaiting us there.

“Ah, Ai Fa... I have been waiting for your arrival.”

Ai Fa stepped back and positioned me as her shield. Since she hadn’t exited

the wagon at all in the morning, this was her first time seeing Lem Dom since yesterday.

“You seem like you’re doing well, Lem Dom...”

“I am, though my back has been aching from being slammed into the ground... It’s almost as if you were embracing me all night long, Ai Fa.”

“Don’t utter such sickening nonsense, you fool.”

As they shot us questioning looks, the other women started unloading the luggage. But as the only one with a real understanding of the circumstances, Yun Sudra looked rather concerned as she did so.

“By the way, why are you hiding behind your clan member like that? I have been greatly anticipating the moment I would finally get to see your beautiful figure...”

“It’s those sickening things you say that make me wish to hide.”

“What a cruel statement...and yet, just having you address me brings me such joy...” Lem Dom said, her gaze toward Ai Fa growing oddly more sensual.

As my clan head gripped my shoulders tightly, I was left at a real loss as to what I should be doing.

“So, ah...this is very difficult to come out and say...” Lem Dom continued.

“Then simply leave it unsaid.”

“No, I’ll say it... For the next half a month, I wish to place myself in the care of not only the Ruu, but the Fa as well.”

“I cannot understand the meaning of your words in the least.”

“I wish to be allowed to stay at the Fa house every other day. The Ruu clan head Donda Ruu already gave his approval.”

That statement left me dumbfounded, and it must have been the same for Ai Fa too.

“Wh-What are you saying? I cannot imagine Donda Ruu ever approving of such a thing. To begin with, did you even reveal to him your ridiculous idea of wishing to become a female hunter?”

“Of course. It wouldn’t do to make a request of a leading clan head while hiding my true intentions. And now my own clan head will know of my intent as well,” Lem Dom stated, a firm light suddenly shining in her eyes. “But it’s fine. My clan head Deek had surely already vaguely sensed as much, and I had intended on revealing it to him when I turned fifteen... And on top of all that, I intend to give everything I have to trying to live as a hunter.”

“Did you think carefully about what I told you?” Ai Fa questioned in a firm tone.

“Of course.” Lem Dom nodded back. “Even without needing you to tell me, it is obvious that if I wish to live as a female hunter, I will be shunned by those around me. Even so, I cannot simply cast aside my feelings. Wasn’t that also the case with you, Ai Fa?”

My clan head didn’t seem to have an answer.

“You persisted in your desires regardless, and for that, I respect you more than anyone. I want to learn the will of a female hunter from you. I won’t ask that you take me into the forest, of course. Yesterday I had it thoroughly beaten into me that I wasn’t yet qualified for that.”

Ai Fa simply stared at her.

“I swear I won’t interfere with your work. I’ll simply wait at your home for you to return. My hope is just to observe you from up close. And I intend to work hard at manning the stove as well, naturally. So...won’t you please let me stay by your side, Ai Fa?”

“Every other day for half a month, correct?”

“That’s right. But if the Rutim and the north are able to exchange women after that, it could end up being extended.”

I could clearly sense Ai Fa’s fretting on my back. She herself had unsparingly tried to shut Lem Dom down, but the girl was still saying she wouldn’t give up on her wishes. Just what did my clan head really feel about her?

The idea of wanting to be a hunter despite being a woman was territory that had belonged to Ai Fa alone, but now this Lem Dom girl had set foot there as well. As long as she wasn’t being half-hearted about it, that wasn’t something

my clan head could just ignore.

“Asuta, what do you think?”

“I’ll agree with whatever my clan head decides, of course.”

The thought of living together with some other woman was definitely awkward in a number of ways, but if it was just for half a month, then it was no big deal. What mattered most were Ai Fa’s feelings on the matter.

After a few moments of silence, Ai Fa quietly gave her answer. “In that case...as the Fa Clan head, I shall permit your stay, Lem Dom.”

“Really?!”

My field of view suddenly did a big flip. Lem Dom’s burly arms had sent my slender body flying, and I swiftly ended up on the ground.

“Thank you! I will use every last bit of strength I have, Ai Fa!”

“Cut it out, you fool! What in the world is the matter with you?!”

Ai Fa was now desperately struggling, having been hugged from the front by Lem Dom. But since the younger girl was superior in terms of raw muscle strength, my clan head was having quite a time trying to shake free.

“I take back what I said! I cannot allow a fool like you to stay in my house!”

“Oh, as a person of the forest’s edge, you would go back on your word? It’s wrong to tell lies, Ai Fa...” Lem Dom stated with a blissful smile, rubbing her cheek against Ai Fa’s hair. That expression really made her look her age in spite of her muscular build.



After that I experimented some more with the giba curry, then back at the Fa house I worked on the combined fuwano and poitan dish as well as the eyeballs and brains delivered by the Fou clan. And that was how it went until night approached.

I ate the test dish made with the brains and eyeballs with members of the Fou and Ran clans, then for tonight’s dinner at the Fa house I made cubed giba meat stew and giba soup prepared with tau oil, which were dishes offered at The

Great Southern Tree. Since Lem Dom would now be staying with us every other day, I figured I would have her taste those dishes tonight so she could start helping me make them in the morning. Then I added baked poitan and a bit of a salad, which I figured would give it a perfect nutritional balance.

“Asuta, I cannot bring myself to lie, so allow me to speak frankly...” Lem Dom started in on me as we were eating the night’s meal. “All of your dishes have been truly shocking. It feels foolish to even try to compare what I have eaten in the past to them.”

“Ah, I’m glad to hear it.”

“But how should I put this...? I don’t think that all of your dishes are equally tasty. I believe that spicy dish I had midday at the Ruu settlement was more delicious than this sweet and soft meat.”

“Oh? I’m still developing the giba curry, but you liked it better?” That was definitely an intriguing opinion to hear. “For reference, what dishes were to your taste out of the ones Toor Deen prepared for that banquet?”

“Let’s see... Of the dishes made that night, the ones I found tasty were the soup dish using entrails...and the meat grilled together with myamuu.”

“So the tarapa offal hot pot and the steak with myamuu sauce, huh? I suppose that means you like heavily spiced dishes. Ah, but you seemed to enjoy that karon milk soup from yesterday, didn’t you?”

“Yes. Perhaps I’m more fond of dishes that make me feel like they grant me strength.”

I couldn’t tell if she had an unbalanced diet or an acute sense of taste. Those examples alone weren’t enough to make the call, but her cooking skills didn’t seem half bad, so it seemed like Lem Dom had a surprising amount of potential as a chef.

And that direct manner of speaking was something she shared with Lala Ruu, which I couldn’t say I hated. But my own clan head had a sour look firmly affixed to her face and was just silently continuing to eat. Since she couldn’t use her back tooth on one side, she seemed to be having trouble even with the cubed giba meat stew, which I had boiled up to be extra tender.

“Do you have any dishes you especially like or dislike, Ai Fa?” Lem Dom asked with a sidelong glance, only for my clan head’s eyebrows to instantly rise.

“My preferences have nothing to do with you.”

“Such a tease... But it’s wonderful how much dignity you display as clan head.”

Ai Fa offered no response to that.

“Hey, Ai Fa, I heard from the Ruu men that you ended up in the top eight in the Ruu clan’s contest of strength. And you even fought on an equal level with the Rutim clan head?”

“It wasn’t equal. I lost to Dan Rutim.”

“But back then, the injury to your left arm still wasn’t fully healed, right? To display strength close to the Rutim clan head in spite of that... That’s truly amazing, isn’t it?” Lem Dom replied with a seductive look shining bright in her eyes that reminded me of Vina Ruu. “I’ve always believed either my clan head or Gulaf Zaza was the strongest hunter at the forest’s edge. But I have sensed that the Ruu and Rutim clan heads possess a similar level of strength... That means that you are a hunter who can stand alongside the four of them.”

“Can you really measure the strength of others so precisely, Lem Dom?”

“I wouldn’t say I can tell too exactly. After all, I completely underestimated you, Ai Fa... But I believe only the Ruu and Rutim clan heads can measure up to Deek or Gulaf Zaza. I haven’t seen anyone stronger than that at the Ruu settlement at all.”

Now that I thought about it, I had noticed before how Ai Fa and Ludo Ruu had an eye for judging how strong someone was because they had been able to see the great strength of their fathers from up close and personal. That was also supposedly thanks to the fact that they didn’t have the robust builds of Jiza or Darmu Ruu, making them painfully aware of their own weaknesses. With that in mind, perhaps Lem Dom had ended up with a not-so-different point of view, having grown up in a similar environment thanks to the Dom settlement being so full of such intimidating hunters.

As she slurped down her soup, Ai Fa shot Lem Dom an annoyed glance.

“A contest of strength is ultimately no more than that, a contest. What is important to a hunter is their ability to defeat giba, not one another.”

“But you also hunt down a truly shocking number of giba all on your own, don’t you? I feel truly blessed to be living in the same era as a female hunter such as you, Ai Fa.”

“I am still just an inexperienced seventeen-year-old myself. You should look up to hunters like Donda Ruu instead, who have displayed their strength for quite some time,” Ai Fa stated in an annoyed tone, setting down her plate. “Furthermore, Bartha of Masara is there at the Ruu settlement. Have you yet formed a bond with her, Lem Dom?”

“You mean that guest of the Ruu clan? Yes, we’ve talked at least a little...but her son is the one hunting giba.”

“But from what I am told, she hunted beasts every bit as ferocious as giba back where she comes from. She is also someone who can show you a path forward.”

“Hmm.” Lem Dom tilted her head, not really getting it. “All right. If you say so, then I’ll try talking to her more if I get the chance. But being by your side today is already enough to fill my heart to the brim.”

“How many times do you intend to make me tell you to stop with such foolish statements?”

“Aah, that piercing look... It sends shivers down my spine,” Lem Dom uttered, her gaze positively clinging to Ai Fa. Looking desperate, my clan head tore into a baked poitan.

“By the way, about that banquet Polarth mentioned...” I interjected, figuring changing the topic would help smooth things over. “The official decision will have to wait for the response from the leading clan heads, but what do you think, Ai Fa?”

“I am not especially fond of the idea, but I also can see no reason to refuse. As long as we have several hunters accompany you as bodyguards like last time, it should be no issue.”

“I see. Then I guess it’s fine, from the sound of things.”

“What, are you not fond of the idea either? In that case, you should tell the leading clan heads what your real opinion is.”

“No, I wouldn’t say that. It’s just... I think I might be getting a little too worked up.”

“Worked up? Why is that?”

“Because a chef who’s supposed to be Mikel’s equal is going to be manning the stove on the same day, of course. I just can’t stay calm after hearing that.”

“Hmm?” Ai Fa mused, furrowing her brow. “But the chefs from the castle town use different techniques. I believe Mikel himself said as much, and that Timalo chef made nothing but strange dishes, correct?”

“I’m not so sure. Mikel said that *most* of the chefs in the castle town hadn’t mastered their ingredients. So this Varkas guy could be a fine chef with skills that Mikel would see as legitimate.”

“I can’t speak on such hypotheticals. And I also don’t care either way about chefs from the castle town. However...if you are excited, then I’m glad to hear it.”

“I see. In that case, I’ll let myself get good and energized.” I chuckled, making Ai Fa break out in an ever-so-faint smile.

Instantly, Lem Dom lamented, “Aww... Hey Ai Fa, can’t you point such a gentle expression my way too, at least every once in a while?”

“Quiet, you,” Ai Fa shot back, that hard-earned smile disappearing.

When I thought about how much of a hassle all this was, a strained grin found its way onto my face. “Still, Dan Rutim’s birthday celebration will be coming up first. I intend to put everything I’ve got into it, so go ahead and look forward to that.”

“Right,” Ai Fa nodded, still pouting.

And so, the first night of Lem Dom staying with us came to a silent close.

The following morning, I awoke to an angry shout of “What are you doing?!”

Wondering what was going on, I leaped to my feet, only to find Ai Fa and Lem Dom grappling and raising a commotion atop the rug. It seemed Lem Dom had hugged Ai Fa once again in spite of past warnings, provoking that shout.

“You truly are alert to the presence of others... How wonderful...”

“I shouldn’t *have to be* alert to the threat of someone suddenly hugging me! Get off already!”

At that, Ai Fa forced Lem Dom off, then sat up while breathing heavily. And down on the floor, Lem Dom looked up at my clan head’s face with a passionate gaze.

Both of them had their hair down, so the scene had a strangely seductive feel to it. Plus, all the hot air they had created seemed to overwhelm the refreshing morning atmosphere and fill the room with a thick smell.

Hmm. I’m used to it with Ai Fa, but I have to question the ethics of sleeping together with another woman.

The separate rooms in the Fa house were all used for the pantry and other storage, so the only place for a guest to sleep was in a huddle with us in the main room.

“Next time you try something like that, I really will toss you out of the house! Understand?! Now go change over in that room!” As she castigated Lem Dom with an intense look in her eyes, Ai Fa sidled over my way. It seemed I would once again have to be her shield as she shouted at the younger girl.

“I understand. You needn’t be so cold.”

After shooting Ai Fa a sidelong glance, Lem Dom disappeared into the storage room. That was where she left the luggage she had brought along.

“Really, just what in the world is she thinking? Clinging to someone who isn’t even a family member like that, it gives me the creeps...”

“Yeah, I can see that. But, well, doesn’t it just go to show how much she adores you?” I half joked, only to earn back a very hostile glare.

“Asuta, you don’t seem concerned in the least, no matter how frustrating this

is for me.”

“Huh? I mean, it’s charming how she’s so fond of you, isn’t it?”

“What part of that is ‘charming’?!” Ai Fa retorted as she put me into a sleeper hold from behind.

My neck hurt, and I could feel my body twisting unnaturally. Suddenly taking her very seriously, I wailed, “Sorry!”

At any rate, that morning got off to a hectic start.

After getting changed for the morning, our first job was to wash our cooking equipment from last night, then we’d head to the Lanto river to bathe and gather firewood and herbs. Fortunately, while we did all that, there weren’t any more incidents worth mentioning like the one earlier. However, the women we ran into at the washing place were all surprised by the sight of Lem Dom. After all, it was rare to see someone from the infamous northern settlement around here.

She formerly fell under the Suun and was now under the Zaza, who were chosen as one of the new leading clans. The Dom were known to be especially fierce even among their fellow clans, so the women of the Fou and Ran seemed rather intimidated by Lem Dom.

“She’ll be helping us out with prep work every other day for the next couple weeks, so please treat her kindly,” I announced, causing even more commotion to spread among the women.

As she looked over them, Lem Dom broke out in a provocative grin. “We’re doing the same work, and it’s not like I belong to a leading clan or anything. You don’t have to worry about treating me in any special way.”

“Of course... We understand that while the people of the north may be intimidating, they aren’t unreasonable,” the Fou clan head’s wife replied, looking rather nervous.

The Zaza were made one of the leading clans with the approval of all of the clan heads. For the people under those other clans, they just had to believe that their new leaders wouldn’t act tyrannically like the Suun had done.

Once the washing was finished, we returned to the Fa house. Later, as we were heading to the outskirts of the forest, Lem Dom shrugged her shoulders.

“It seems the northern clans are shunned no matter where we go. You two and the members of the clans under the Ruu seem to be the only ones who act undaunted around me.”

“I wouldn’t say they’re trying to shun you. And the Fou and Sudra clan heads aren’t afraid of folks from up north either.”

“Ah right, the Fou clan head participates in meetings between the leading clan heads, doesn’t he? I hear tell that he’s a rather fine hunter.”

I thought it was great that his reputation was able to spread all the way to the northern settlement. After all, just like Raielfam Sudra, Baadu Fou was a precious comrade to me and Ai Fa.

At any rate, at the outskirts of the forest we set about cleansing ourselves and gathering materials.

Though Ai Fa and Lem Dom bathed together, there wasn’t enough of a commotion to concern me. However, I did hear Ai Fa complain, “Stop staring at me.”

After that, it was finally time to prep for business...but since Lem Dom was just a beginner, I couldn’t afford to assign her any important jobs just yet. So for now, I had her bake up the day’s poitan, asking Toor Deen to provide her some guidance in the process. The Deen also fell under the Zaza, and the young girl seemed surprisingly unintimidated by Lem Dom, so I had no issue entrusting her with the task.

“Hmm, you certainly are skilled. That’s rather impressive for one so young.”

“N-No, I’m nothing special. And you’re doing really well at baking those.”

“I got to help out a little with the task at the Ruu house yesterday. Baking poitan is the first thing one must learn, after all.”

There was only a five-year age difference between the two of them, but a gap of over thirty centimeters in terms of height. Still, it was pretty charming seeing the young little Toor Deen giving guidance as Lem Dom silently worked.

And as Lem Dom obediently carried out her tasks, the Fou and Ran women seemed like they were gradually lowering their guards and loosening up. In fact, I suspected they would be ready to speak to her themselves by the time work was over.

At this rate, they may be able to actually get to know one another a bit over the next half month, I thought to myself, feeling relieved.

I didn't know what to think back when she suddenly challenged Ai Fa, but Lem Dom was one of our comrades here at the forest's edge too. The people of the forest's edge had a tendency to overly value blood ties and not have much interaction outside of that, so hopefully this would be a good chance to deepen their bonds.

Anyway, we finished up the prep work and it was finally time to head off to the post town. But at that point, Lem Dom started looking seriously dejected and said, "Huh? You're going to the post town again today, Ai Fa?"

"Indeed. When I was splitting firewood, the root of my tooth started aching again. I won't be able to carry out my giba hunting in this state," Ai Fa replied while putting on her hunter's cloak and hanging her sword from her hip. "It's vexing, but a hunter that isn't at full strength cannot hunt down giba. Any hunter who does not understand that fact will end up having their soul returned to the forest before they do much proper hunting at all."

"I see... You're saying there's a difference between bravery and recklessness, right? In that case, I understand," Lem Dom answered with a bit of a pout. "But why are you heading to the post town, then? I understand that you went yesterday to purchase a sword, but you shouldn't have any further business there."

"Even if I were to stay home, there's no work left for me to handle there. And if I'm just going to rest, I see little difference."

"If you don't see the difference, then you should rest at home. Or do you just want to stay by your clan member's side that badly?"

Ai Fa's cheeks reddened slightly, but Lem Dom hurried on into the wagon.

"Well in that case, I've got no reason to stay behind at the Fa house either, so

let me ride along. Just drop me off at the Ruu settlement.”

After calming herself, Ai Fa also climbed into the wagon. That group of me, Ai Fa, Toor Deen, and Lem Dom really did make for quite an unusual quartet.

My clan head was still rather sleepy from the effects of the romu leaves, so the whole way there Lem Dom talked with Toor Deen. Fortunately Toor Deen didn't seem bothered by that, and awkwardly did her best to reply. It seemed that Lem Dom really had acknowledged the younger girl thanks to the banquet she had prepared.

Toor Deen used to belong to the Suun clan, but unlike with the former members of the main house, that doesn't seem to be an issue. I guess she sees the branch houses as completely separate, huh?

Would the day come when Lem Dom could open her heart to Yamiru Lea and Tsuvai too? I was definitely more than a little curious to see.

“Huh?! Ai Fa, you're coming along to the post town again? Hooray!” Rimee Ruu excitedly shouted upon our arrival at the Ruu settlement. That was no surprise, as she was on stall duty today. “Yay! I'm so happy! Reina, I'm gonna go ride in the wagon with Ai Fa!”

“All right. Asuta, please take care of Rimee...”

“Of course. But wasn't it Rimee and Sheera Ruu on for today?”

“Yes. But Sheera Ruu's youngest brother was injured, so I ended up switching with her. I look forward to working with you again today.”

Sheera Ruu had three younger brothers. I only knew the name of the eldest, Shin Ruu, and the youngest was still less than ten years old.

“He was apparently climbing a tree when he slipped and fell. But I hear he should be up and walking again tomorrow.”

“I see. That's definitely a worry. Is Sheera Ruu doing okay?”

“Yes. Ryada and Tari Ruu are there to help out with work around the house. But her younger brother is terribly faint of heart, so she was worried about the thought of leaving the settlement right now.”

I figured it was only natural for the kindhearted Sheera Ruu to think that way.

On top of that, Reina Ruu looked to be in an incredibly good mood. She must have been overjoyed at getting to go to the post town two days in a row.

“Well then, how about we head off? And thanks for all your hard work today, Lem Dom.”

“Right. I’ll be praying for your safe return. But, well, as long as Ai Fa’s with you, you’ll surely be able to overcome any hardship you may face.”

With that, we got going towards the post town.

We had said farewell to Lem Dom, while Rimee Ruu and Yamiru Lea joined the group. It made for a rather peaceful dynamic. Yamiru Lea spoke to Toor Deen, while Rimee Ruu chatted with Ai Fa. Perhaps since she rarely had the chance to do so, my clan head seemed to be brushing aside the drowsiness as best she could to talk with her young friend.

After arriving at the post town, we delivered the meals and fresh meat to the three inns, then headed off to set up our stalls. As always, we had a big crowd of customers even before opening, which would mean another successful day’s business.

While Ai Fa took a break in the wagon, we worked hard at our stalls. And once we were past the morning peak and the traffic settled down a bit, Mikel stopped by for the first time in two days.

“Welcome! Is it just you today?”

“Yeah. You have some sort of problem with that?” Mikel brusquely retorted, and then he went ahead and explained. “Myme is holed up in the kitchen wrestling with that giba meat. I bought a variety of seasonings for her too, so I figure she won’t be setting foot outside for some time.”

“I see. I’m really looking forward to seeing what sorts of giba dishes Myme will come up with.”

“Hmph. I’m sure she’ll be asking to have you taste test again if you give her a few days. If she offers you something shabbier than her karon and kimyuus dishes, feel free to have a hearty laugh in her face.”

As he offered that mean-spirited comment about his own daughter, Mikel

purchased a giba manju. Unfortunately, his lot for the giba cutlet sandwich wasn't a winner.

"Ah, now that I think about it, there was something I wanted to ask you, Mikel..." I called out, as there was a bit of a break in customers and Mikel was still hanging around near the stall. "Do you know a chef named Varkas? Apparently he's rather famous in the castle town..."

"Varkas?" Mikel repeated, furrowing his brow. "Now that's a name I haven't heard in some time. He was either the best or second best chef in Genos."

"Ah, you think so too, huh? The truth is, it looks like he and I may end up manning the stove for the same event."

At that, Mikel's brow furrowed even further.

"That certainly is something. Even I have only eaten his cooking a handful of times... And let me tell you, as a chef, he is not at all half-baked."

"I see. If you say so, then he must really be something..."

"Hmph. I'm nothing but an old fool. But that guy..." Mikel started to say, only to hold his tongue for a moment. "Well, I don't think there's much point trying to describe it with words. At any rate, there's no doubt that man is an impressively skilled chef. I'm sure you'll be surprised too if you get a chance to taste his cooking."

"Right. Well then, I'll pray that I get that opportunity," I briefly replied, doing my best to suppress the excitement I was feeling.

Having finished off his giba manju, Mikel snorted "Hmph," and held out some more coins. "Anyway, give me one more manju. If I return empty-handed, that fool will kick up a huge fuss."

"Thank you. Ah, and do you have any thoughts about that matter with smoking meat?"

"I'm busy with work right now, so it'll be at least a few days before I can head over that way. If you're serious about learning though, then go ahead and get things ready."

"Right, I actually wanted to ask you about those preparations. What herbs do

we need, and how should we go about getting the house that will be the smoking hut ready?”

With a real sour look on his face, Mikel shook his head.

“I’ve got a packed day of work ahead of me too, so I don’t exactly have time for a nice long chat. I’ll explain things for you tomorrow or the day after, so just hurry up and hand over the manju already.”

“Got it. My apologies for the trouble.”

Mikel had been making use of breaks in his charcoal-making work to walk from the Turan land to the post town. After he purchased giba dishes for Myme like this, he must have headed back home to deliver it. It certainly did sound like quite a bit of effort.

“Ah, what about the lot?”

Silently, Mikel drew a stick from the wooden cylinder.

When I spied the red mark on the end, I smiled and said, “Congratulations. The giba cutlet sandwich will be three red coins, so my apologies, but could I have one more?”

“Hmph. That girl’s got all the luck, and thanks to that now I have to spend extra...”

Since Mikel couldn’t move his right hand freely, he handed over the coin and then accepted the giba cutlet sandwich with his left.

“Thank you for your continued business.”

He offered no response to that, and swiftly left. As he vanished into the distance, Yamiru Lea shrugged her shoulders from over in the neighboring stall.

“That man is still just as unsociable as always. But in spite of that, he actually seems to be rather considerate.”

“Yeah. I mean, he’s offering to come all the way to the settlement at the forest’s edge to show us how to smoke meat. And I’m certainly grateful for that fact.”

Besides, it wasn’t like Yamiru Lea herself was any less unsociable than him.

But no matter how blunt they might be, I had complete trust in both her and Mikel.

As that thought ran through my head, Yun and Li Sudra arrived. Once again, they had shown up rather early.

“Thanks for coming. But the sun still hasn’t hit its peak, you know.”

“Of course. If you don’t mind, could you please have Yun work until then?”

She hardly had to ask, especially since they had insisted they didn’t need any payment for time spent outside of usual work hours. Instead, they were doing this unpaid volunteer work so that she could learn the job as soon as possible.

In exchange, Yun Sudra would also start earning a wage once the sun hit its peak. Currently her hourly pay was one red coin, but the plan was to raise that as she learned the job.

“I-I look forward to working with you again today, Asuta,” Yun Sudra said with a deep bow, her face having turned red. As always, unlike the similarly-aged Lem Dom, she really was extremely polite.

“Well then, could I have you two handle the giba meat poitan wraps? Toor Deen and Yamiru Lea, I leave the giba manju up to you.”

I was at least nominally in charge, so I figured I should watch over the pair from the Sudra clan. And then once everyone had rearranged themselves, Ai Fa quietly approached from the wagon.

“Huh? Are you done resting up?”

“Indeed. If I rest too much while it’s bright out, I will end up sleeping poorly.”

As she said that, Ai Fa stood and observed Yun and Li Sudra from a step removed. It looked like her eyelids were drooping a few more millimeters than usual, but her gaze remained just as piercing as always.

“It seems that things are bustling again today...”

“Yeah, and the sun’s going to hit its peak soon. By the way, once the time comes are you going to accompany me to The Kimyuus’s Tail?”

“Is there any reason for me to remain here?”

“I mean, Rimee Ruu’s here today. And it’d be rough walking all around with your tooth aching, right?”

Ai Fa shifted her posture so no one else could see and pouted. In the face of that adorable expression, I unwittingly broke out in a smile.

“Was that just unnecessary consideration on my part? I’d be happy to have you come along, naturally.”

“Very well then...” Ai Fa replied, her frown vanishing.

It was then that Yamiru Lea cut in. “Oh my, it seems we have a noble’s wagon approaching again. That’s been happening unusually frequently these last few days, hasn’t it?”

Yesterday Polarth stopped by, and a few days prior to that there was that messenger from Leeheim. As a rule, it always seemed to be someone from one of those two camps visiting our stalls...and for today, it appeared to be the latter.

“That’s the crest of the house of Saturas,” I commented, at which Ai Fa’s eyebrow twitched.

“That noble who gave Reina Ruu those flowers was from the house of Saturas, correct?”

“Yeah. And it looks like the man himself decided to pay a personal visit today.” I had determined that from the number of armed guards present. After all, there were four of them riding totos surrounding the wagon. Such a grandiose escort had to mean Leeheim himself was here.

Just as I had expected, a familiar young noble soon appeared from inside the stopped wagon. Accompanied by four guards and one attendant, Leeheim approached our stalls. Then he circled around the rear and walked right past Rimee Ruu, so that he was facing Reina Ruu as she worked.

“It has been some time, Reina Ruu of the forest’s edge. Did you enjoy those flowers from the other day?”

After handing over a giba burger to a customer, Reina Ruu slowly turned to face Leeheim.

Leeheim was a young noble, the oldest son of the house of Saturas. The first time I had met him was at the dinner party held in the castle town, and my impression of him from back then was that he was a somewhat haughty and cynical young man. Over the course of the past month and a half or so, that impression hadn't significantly changed.

In terms of appearance, he definitely had a look fitting for a noble. His dark brown hair was neatly combed down and seemed a bit oily, and over the top of his classy-looking attire he had on a white cloak. He was perhaps a little thinner than he should have been, but he had a handsome face and the way he moved seemed elegant enough.

And yet he was always wearing a cynical-looking smile, and his gaze always appeared to be appraising the people around him. I wouldn't say he seemed outright malicious, but it definitely felt like it would take some time till we could reach a mutual understanding.

"Tsuwai, take care of the stall for a bit," Reina Ruu called out to the young girl, then she bowed to Leeheim. "My thanks for the impressive gift from the other day... Those flowers are currently on display in the Ruu house."

"I see. If they were to your liking, then I'm glad," Leeheim replied, puffing out his slender chest with a look of satisfaction.

His eyes were fixed solely on Reina Ruu, and he didn't seem to even notice me working at the neighboring stall.

So Leeheim really is infatuated with her, huh? Well, Reina Ruu would probably seem quite charming to just about anyone.

Reina Ruu was seventeen just like me, and only around 150 or so centimeters tall. Still, her face was really cute, and she boasted impressive proportions. A good bit of her fair skin was hidden under her veil and shawl while doing business, but that wasn't enough to detract from her charm.

This is definitely preferable to Cyclaeus not even treating the people of the forest's edge like fellow human beings... Still, just what is Leeheim plotting, getting close to Reina Ruu like that? I thought to myself as I looked over at Ai Fa.

My clan head had a composed look in her eyes as she watched over the exchange. Still, I figured she was also watching the four armed guards surrounding them like a hawk.

The same also seemed to be true for the customers around the stall. Everyone who noticed them either hurriedly finished their business and left, or otherwise distanced themselves from the stalls while trying to see what was going on.

But Leeheim paid no attention whatsoever to the happenings around him, instead continuing to converse with Reina Ruu.

“It seems business is going smoothly with your stalls as well. Still, I suppose that is only natural when you are selling food of this quality for so cheap a price.”

“Yes... The people of the post town really seem to enjoy giba cooking.”

“Hmph. If you left it up to me, you would have an even easier time earning coins in the castle town,” Leeheim stated, a bit of a teasing tone in his voice.

In the past, he had plotted to buy up all of the giba meat. The one to put a stop to the plan was Duke Marstein Genos himself, fearing the thought of nobles cornering the market.

“You really are too fine of a woman to be working a stall like this. If we just changed your outfit, no one would question it in the least if you spent your time in the castle town.”

“Even so, I am a woman of the forest’s edge...” Reina Ruu replied, her face looking like she was suppressing her emotions as best she could.

“Hmph,” Leeheim snorted, breaking out into a grin. “Well, so be it. I am rather busy myself, so let us promptly move on to the purpose of my visit here today.”

“Of course. Do you want to order a giba dish?”

“Before that, I have something else to take care of,” Leeheim stated, then he gave a pretentious snap of his fingers.

The attendant waiting behind him reverently held out a silk bundle. When Reina Ruu’s eyes fell on it, her brow furrowed ever so slightly.

“What is that? I can’t see any reason for you to be giving me further gifts...”

“There is no need for such stiff, formal thinking. Consider it a mere trifle in thanks for the delicious cooking.”

At that, Leeheim snapped his fingers again and the attendant gently unwrapped the bundle. What appeared from within was a dazzlingly brilliant silver necklace. There was a deep red jewel gleaming in the center, and the silverwork was quite elaborate, showing a level of craftsmanship the likes of which I had never seen before in this world.

“If you put this on, your beauty will only stand out all the more profoundly. Please, don’t hesitate to accept it.”

Reina Ruu just stood there silently.

“What is the matter? Is this your first time seeing an accessory made of pure silver?” Leeheim questioned with a smug grin.

I could tell that Reina Ruu was desperately holding back a sigh as she shook her head.

“My apologies, but I cannot accept this...”

“I told you there is no reason to hesitate, did I not? There is meaning to a lovely woman wearing such a beautiful accessory.”

Reina Ruu once again somehow managed to hold herself back, but there was now a clear look of defiance burning in her eyes. Though she had a cute and somewhat adorable appearance, the fierce blood of the Ruu clan flowed in her veins nonetheless.

“There is no custom among the people of the forest’s edge for accepting gifts from anyone but blood relatives. To be perfectly honest, accepting the flowers from before was also unjustified...but it didn’t seem proper to so bluntly refuse your generosity, which is why we took them.”

“Then simply do the same this time as well. Rather than being obstinate, simply accept it.”

“I cannot. I don’t believe this is a decision I’m permitted to make on my own,” Reina Ruu said, deeply bowing her veiled head. “If you continue to insist on

offering me gifts even so, then please get permission from my father, the leading clan head Donda Ruu. If you have his approval, then I would be able to accept it.”

“There is no need to go bringing leading clan heads or the sort into the conversation. My, you really are a hardheaded girl,” Leeheim said, still wearing a faint smile as he grabbed hold of the necklace that his attendant was holding out. And then, he placed his other hand on Reina Ruu’s shoulder. “Come now, turn around. I will put it on you personally.”

“Please, let go!” Reina Ruu shouted, angrily slapping away Leeheim’s hand.

The necklace he had been holding fell to the ground.

Leeheim stood there dumbfounded for a moment, and then his expression grew furious. “What do you think you’re doing?! Don’t you know who I am?!”

“It doesn’t matter who you are! Touching someone of the opposite sex outside of your family is a taboo!”

“That’s nothing but a custom you all went and created! It has nothing to do with a noble such as myself!”

“Even if you’re a noble, I’m still a woman of the forest’s edge! I won’t simply allow someone to trample over our customs!” Reina Ruu retorted, her eyes burning bright with anger.

Instantly, Leeheim shrunk like a dog that had water thrown over it, taking several steps back. “Wh-What is that look in your eyes?! Are you trying to make an enemy of the house of Saturas? We rule over this entire post town!”

“And so we people of the forest’s edge have no choice but to silently stand here and take it, no matter what outrageous deeds you may attempt?” Reina Ruu questioned, resolutely pressing Leeheim. “From what I’ve been told, Duke Genos himself acknowledged the validity of the people of the forest’s edge living according to our customs. Were those words just lies? Or perhaps Duke Genos’s commands are not valid here in the post town, as it is Saturas land?”

“Th-That’s...”

“We must correct the relationship between the people of the forest’s edge

and the nobles of Genos that had been distorted by Cyclaeus, correct? Am I the one who trampled over that promise, or are you? If I am at fault, then I shall do whatever it takes to apologize, even if it means my very body is torn to shreds!"

"Hold on, Reina Ruu. Losing your temper like that truly will cause bad blood," Ai Fa stated, placing a hand on Reina Ruu's shoulder from behind. Then with a calm yet firm glance, she looked over the armed guards surrounding Leeheim. "That goes for you residents of the castle town as well. Do you intend to draw your weapons on an unarmed woman? No one wishes to see blood shed over a quarrel such as this."

When I saw the guards go a bit pale at those words, I finally realized: in all likelihood, nobody here had expected such staunch resistance from Reina Ruu.

"Reina Ruu, you are a member of the main house of the leading Ruu clan. And from what I have heard, that man there is the eldest son of a count's house. I cannot imagine it being seen as acceptable for two people in such positions to quarrel without the knowledge of the heads of their houses."

"Yes, you're right... I understand. I acted thoughtlessly," Reina Ruu replied, looking truly disheartened. And then, she bowed to Leeheim. "I beg your forgiveness. It was never my intention to quarrel with you."

Leeheim was trembling, his emotions seemingly still in flux. Ultimately, though, he went "Hmph!" and turned away. "How truly unpleasant! I'm leaving! And I shall never visit such a place again!" he uttered before stomping away.

And as the guards went to follow after him, Ai Fa called out, "Hold on. I ask that you take that accessory with you. Reina Ruu has not accepted it, so it is your responsibility to return with it."

Bowing repeatedly as he went, the attendant scooped the accessory up off the ground. And then, he hurried to catch up to his master.

Before long, Leeheim disappeared into the wagon, which then vanished to the north. At that point, I sensed a number of folks around me all sighing in relief.

"Hey, are you going to be all right? It's not exactly wise to go picking fights with nobles, you know," one of the customers called out from the other side of the stall. He was a familiar face, and a resident of the post town. "That was the

young lord of House Saturas, wasn't it? You oppose someone like that, and you won't be able to keep on running your stalls."

"What's that? I'm not going to let him get away with it if he tries to take down these giba stalls!" a nearby customer from the south indignantly chimed in.

At that, Reina Ruu turned my way, her blue eyes tearing up.

"Is our relationship with the nobles going to be ruined because of me? I won't be able to show my face to everyone if we can't keep doing business because of something like this..."

"I-It'll be fine. We'll try consulting with Melfried and Marstein through Polarth. There was just a disconnect between how the two of you felt, so I'm sure everything can be settled smoothly."

"Right. Melfried and Marstein both seem like reasonable men. They will show us what they believe to be the best path forward."

It was a rather unusual state of affairs, with both me and Ai Fa trying to comfort Reina Ruu. But that just went to show how clearly dispirited she looked right now.

Reina Ruu has a pretty impulsive side to her too, huh? I can see how she couldn't put up with Leeheim's attitude.

Still, it wasn't like Leeheim had been acting out of any ill will on his end. Rather, his affections got away from him and made a show of themselves in a bad way. But considering how the people of the forest's edge and the nobles of Genos practically lived in different worlds entirely, it made sense that discrepancies like this would arise now and again.

Even so, we decided to live hand in hand. As long as everyone remembers that, then I'm sure we'll overcome this.

I truly did believe that. And I had no choice but to strive my hardest to make it so.

5

After we finished up business for the day and made it back to the Ruu

settlement, there ended up being a huge scene there as well. But, well, the primary commotion came from Lala Ruu's indignation once she heard what had happened from Reina Ruu. After all, she had been doubtful of Leeheim's actions right from the start.

"I knew it! I just knew something like this was going to happen eventually. That noble was *always* shooting you creepy looks, Reina!"

"Calm down, Lala. You losing your temper won't accomplish anything," Mia Lea interjected. However, even she had a bit of a strained smile when she looked at Reina Ruu. "That goes for you too, Reina. If you were going to be depressed about what happened afterward, then you should have controlled your emotions a little better, wouldn't you say?"

"Right. I'm sorry... What will I do if we can't do business in the post town anymore after this?" Reina Ruu lamented, now clearly on the verge of tears. With looks of clear concern on their faces, Rimee and Vina Ruu also snuggled up to their sister.

"Well, I suppose you aren't as skilled at handling men as Vina... Now then, just what shall we do?"

"Don't you think we should consult with Melfried, since he's in charge of mediating with the people of the forest's edge? We went ahead and reached out already in the post town," I interjected.

"Reached out?" Mia Lea Ruu questioned with a tilt of her head.

"Yes. There's a man named Yang who works in the post town. We told him what happened. He's the head chef for the house of Daleim, so he'll tell Polarth, who should get in contact with Melfried in turn."

"I see, that's good news. But still... It's forbidden to enter or leave the castle town once night falls, correct?"

"Right. If at all possible, it would be good to get in contact with Donda Ruu before that, but what do you think?"

"Hmm, I want to say we should ask Ryada Ruu to go summon him. But Ryada Ruu's only got one good leg, so it would be dangerous if he ran into a giba along the way..."

“In that case, I will accompany him,” Ai Fa volunteered. “I do not know where the traps are set throughout the Ruu hunting grounds, so I couldn’t go on my own. But if I had Ryada Ruu’s guidance, we wouldn’t be in any danger.”

“But aren’t you taking a break from giba hunting because you’re not in perfect condition yourself?”

“Even if it would be difficult to capture a giba, I can at least protect myself from one. Besides, as long as we don’t go too deep into the hunting grounds, there won’t be much of a risk of running into any of the beasts. Once we get far enough in, we simply need to blow a grass whistle to summon a Ruu hunter. If we get even one of them, we can have them fetch Donda Ruu.”

After a bit of thinking, Mia Lea Ruu nodded, “All right. I’m not exactly well versed in the dangers posed by the hunting grounds. But if Ryada Ruu agrees that it would be safe, then we’ll be counting on you, Ai Fa.”

Once Ryada Ruu was informed of the circumstances, he also gave his approval. “I’ve still got enough strength left in me to swing around a blade. So with Ai Fa at my side, I can’t see it being dangerous in the least.”

Ryada Ruu was Sheera and Shin Ruu’s father, a slim man who was just a bit under forty. His mustache had a refined appearance and looked good on him. He used to be a skilled hunter, but hurt his leg on the job and now helped out around the house instead.

As she watched him put on his hunter’s cloak and hang his blade from his hip, his wife Tari Ruu sighed deeply and remarked, “I never imagined I would see you looking like that and heading off into the forest again, Ryada...”

Sheera Ruu and her younger brothers all looked concerned too as they saw Ryada Ruu off. But as for Ryada Ruu himself, he just shot his family a gentle smile.

“There’s nothing to worry about. I’ll be back soon, so take care of the work around the house, Sheera.”

“Of course... Ai Fa, please watch out for our father Ryada.”

“Yes, I swear to see him back safely.”

At that, Ai Fa and Ryada Ruu disappeared into the forest together.

Lem Dom had been standing there watching them go alongside us, and she now gave a deep sigh. “Hunters heading out to the forest really do make for such striking figures. It’s hard to imagine this Ryada Ruu man has withdrawn from giba hunting, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. Still, it’s only been a few months since he retired.”

At that point, Reina Ruu threw her arms around Sheera Ruu, still looking like she was on the verge of tears.

“I’m so sorry, Sheera Ruu. Now even Ryada Ruu is getting dragged into this, all because I couldn’t contain my temper...”

“Don’t apologize. My father Ryada seemed quite proud to be heading into the forest. He must be overjoyed at the chance to do so despite no longer being a hunter,” Sheera Ruu replied, giving a faint smile. “Besides, both Ai Fa and my father said there wouldn’t be any danger, and I believe their words.”

At that point, the sound of Mia Lea Ruu giving a hearty clap caused Reina and Sheera Ruu to both shoot up straight.

“Now then, let’s all carry out our own work! You were still in the middle of preparations, weren’t you, Sheera Ruu?”

“Y-Yes. I think I’ll be finished shortly, though...”

Apparently Sheera Ruu had taken on prep work, having stayed behind today for the sake of her little brother. Ultimately, she and Reina Ruu were the ones in charge of the Ruu stalls.

“Once that’s done with, I would appreciate further instruction from you, Asuta. If we’re going to be manning the stove for the Rutim banquet, then we’ll need the proper training.”

“That’s true. Well then, let’s get working.”

Feeling freshly remotivated, we headed for the kitchen. Just like Ai Fa and Ryada Ruu, we had our own work we needed to carry out. That was what it meant to be people of the forest’s edge. First up came finishing the prep work, then experimenting with giba curry, and finally training for the banquet. In

other words, we had a whole heap of work we needed to take care of.

Reina Ruu's eyes were still a bit teary, but even so, she put everything into her work. And by the time Ai Fa and Ryada Ruu returned, roughly an hour or so had passed.

"Ah, I'm glad to see you made it back safely. And it seems you brought back quite the souvenir," Mia Lea Ruu said, speaking up as representative for everyone.

Ai Fa and Ryada Ruu had brought back Donda and Ludo Ruu, and the latter two were carrying a massive giba.

"We managed to bloodlet this one. Ryada Ruu, could you get it cleaned up?"

After a firm yet gentle glance at Sheera Ruu in the kitchen, Ryada Ruu nodded, "Of course."

Then after the giba was carried to the dissection room, Reina Ruu, Mia Lea Ruu, and I all went ahead and explained the circumstances to Donda Ruu. When we were finished, he loudly snorted, "Hmph! What a ridiculous annoyance. So, you're saying Melfried and I should settle the matter?"

"That's right. I don't think Leeheim will try to stir things up any further, but still...if there's any chance that he might, it could get really bad."

"Hrm, well, we *are* talking about the eldest son of a count here. Our only option seems to be justly determining who was at fault."

Reina Ruu had been acting brave, but at that, her eyes started tearing up again. And realizing that, Donda Ruu turned his burning gaze upon his daughter.

"You really only slapped away his arm and explained the customs of the forest's edge, right, Reina?"

"Yes... I apologize for my short-tempered actions."

"You swear that you didn't beat him to a pulp or the like?"

"O-Of course. I didn't do anything so extreme as that."

"Then stop looking like you're about to break down sobbing," Donda Ruu stated, placing his bulky hand atop Reina Ruu's head. "I'm the one who said

there was no need to reject those flowers. You aren't the only one responsible here. So leave the rest to me."



“Right... I’m sorry, father...” Reina Ruu replied, tears now streaming down her face.

As Donda Ruu’s brow furrowed, he turned toward Mia Lea Ruu. Even though he was one of the foremost hunters of the forest’s edge, it seemed even he might not know how to handle his daughter’s tears.

Mia Lea Ruu placed her hands on Reina Ruu’s shoulders and nestled up close, then shot her husband a beaming smile.

“Well then, we’re counting on you, clan head. The totos is already prepared over there.”

“Right. I’ll bring Ludo along with me. If we don’t make it back before the sun sets, then go ahead and eat without us,” Donda Ruu replied, and then he shot me a glare. “So, they’ve already heard about this in the castle town?”

“Yes. Yang wrapped up his work early and promised to let Polarth know, so at the bare minimum he must have heard about all this.”

“Hmph. If that noble heard, then that should be enough for now. Looks like we put a burden on you too...”

I really was grateful to hear such words from Donda Ruu. And so, feeling rather overjoyed, I smiled back. “No, it’s nothing compared to all the trouble I’ve caused you up till now. Please take care, Donda Ruu.”

“Hmph, I don’t need you to tell me that.”

With that, Donda and Ludo Ruu departed.

After looking out of the corner of my eye at Mia Lea Ruu comforting Reina Ruu, I turned and faced Ai Fa.

“Good work, Ai Fa. I’m just glad you made it back safely.”

“I told you there was no danger, didn’t I? I’m well versed in knowing how to avoid giba.” As always, Ai Fa seemed perfectly calm and composed. And her blue eyes now pointed in the direction where Donda and Ludo Ruu had disappeared. “We’ve done everything we can. Now we just have to believe that the nobles of Genos will see things as they are.”

“It’ll be fine. This relationship of trust we’ve built up over these last couple months won’t just fall apart because of something like this,” I replied, honestly half trying to convince myself.

The sun had fully set before we finally heard what happened at the ensuing meeting in the castle town.



“Everything’s been settled, nice and easy. Actually, it was pretty much all them apologizing to us,” Ludo Ruu explained.

After returning from the castle town, Ludo Ruu had come and visited the Fa house to let us know what happened. We had been in the middle of dinner, but stopped eating to hear his report.

“The lord of the land said he would give a warning to the noble who tried to make a move on Reina. Apparently that guy should have stepped aside as soon as Reina turned down his gift.”

“I see. Glad to hear it. I’m sure Reina Ruu must be so relieved too.”

“Yeah, she’s probably sobbing like a kid about now. I can already see the troubled look on my old man’s face,” Ludo Ruu said with a mischievous chuckle. “And that Melfried noble looked real angry too. It was hard to see on his face, but I could feel him getting that same sort of air about him as Jiza.”

“He was angry? At what?”

“At that Leeheim guy. The nobles of Genos are right in the middle of trying to correct their relationship with us people of the forest’s edge, and then Leeheim almost screwed it all up with his temper. Melfried said that was a ‘grave matter,’” Ludo Ruu replied, bringing his hands together behind his head. “And Polarth was there too. He was really concerned about whether or not you’d be coming to the castle town, Asuta.”

“Right. I’d be happy to go for it as long as the leading clan heads give their permission.”

“We’ll just have to wait for Dari Sauti and Gulaf Zaza to give their responses. That’s what my old man said. But, well, I can’t see any reason for turning the

request down,” Ludo Ruu remarked, then suddenly he leaned forward. “So Asuta, you’ve been invited to the castle town twice now?”

“Yeah. To inspect some new ingredients, and to cook for that banquet to greet the envoys from Banarm. What about it?”

“Well, if you’re going there twice, do you think I could help guard you at least one of those times?”

“Hmm? You want to go to the castle town, Ludo Ruu?”

“I don’t care a lick about the castle town, but if I stick close to you, I should get a chance to eat your cooking,” Ludo Ruu replied, staring at the meal spread out before us. “I haven’t gotten a chance to eat anything you’ve made lately. And it sure does look tasty... I still haven’t eaten dinner yet, you know...”

“Ah, I can share a bit of my portion if you’d like.”

“You mean it?” Ludo Ruu asked, his eyes sparkling.

“Is there not a dinner waiting for you back at the Ruu settlement? And wouldn’t eating at another’s house not just once but twice would go against the customs of the forest’s edge?”

“It’s not like it’s a taboo or anything, right? It’s gotten really late and I haven’t eaten anything, so I’m starving!”

Well, we could hardly turn him away after all that. I portioned off a bit of the giba offal stew that we had left on the stove to keep warm, and some of the still-untouched cold shabu-shabu salad for Ludo Ruu.

As he ate it, Ludo Ruu narrowed his eyes and went “Mmm!” with a girlish and adorable smile. “Your cooking’s just as tasty as always! I can’t wait for Dan Rutim’s birthday banquet!”

“Ah, you were invited too? I heard it would be two members invited from each related clan...”

“Of course I’ll be there! I’m not going to yield a chance to eat your cooking to anyone!”

There were now just two days left till Dan Rutim’s birthday. My invitation to the castle town and Mikel’s second visit to the forest’s edge would come after

that. And now that today's incident had been firmly put to rest, I was finally free to focus on that big event.

"Hmm? Are you eating hamburger steak there, Ai Fa?" Ludo Ruu questioned, craning his neck. In a flash, Ai Fa pulled her plate in close.

"I need soft food because my tooth hurts! So I absolutely refuse to hand this over!"

"Nobody's asking you to. But now that I've eaten a bit, it's only making me feel all the hungrier..."

"Then hurry back to your own house already!"

Just like yesterday, it ended up being another hectic night. Still, even that sort of commotion felt very reassuring to me.

I'm glad Melfried and Polarth were understanding. I just hope that we can reconcile things with Leeheim too.

With that thought in mind, I once again started eating my own dinner.

Chapter 3: The Rutim Banquet

1

After that, two days passed, and the twenty-sixth of the black month arrived. The day of Dan Rutim's birthday celebration.

Entrusting the basic prep work to the Rutim women, we went to the post town to sell food, just like always. Doing that and returning to the settlement would leave us four hours until sunset, so it wouldn't be any issue.

There was still time left till the sun would hit its peak, but Li and Yun Sudra had already shown up. From what I'd been told, now that they could purchase ingredients for the Sudra clan before they headed home, that gave them a bit of extra leeway in terms of work around the house.

Well, it made sense that it would take a good bit of effort, buying ingredients for a family of nine without a wagon. The folks in the main Ruu house used to visit the post town once every three days, so it must have been similar for the Sudra clan. That was also why Donda Ruu went and bought a new totos and a wagon for those under him.

I'd really like to come up with some sort of excuse to buy a totos-pulled wagon for the Fou, the Ran, and everyone else in our part of the forest to use, honestly.

At any rate, business seemed to be going smoothly again today.

However...

"Seems like you're getting pretty used to the job, Yun Sudra," I called out.

When Yun Sudra froze up in response, the baked poitan she was holding fell to the ground.

"Ah! I'm so sorry!" she replied, going pale as a sheet.

"It's fine. We always have extra, after all. I should be the one saying sorry for calling out to you so suddenly."

“No, this is all because I was careless!” Yun Sudra lamented as she scooped up the fallen poitan, looking at me with teary eyes. “I’ll take this poitan back with me and pay you for it! I’m... I’m so sorry...”

“No, really, it’s all right. You’ve been doing well enough that it’s no problem at all writing off a mistake like that. Right, Li Sudra?”

“Yes, I agree. Still, you do seem to get careless an awful lot when Asuta is nearby, don’t you, Yun...? I won’t feel comfortable stepping down until you overcome whatever the issue is, so please try to keep that in mind.”

“Right...” Yun Sudra replied, her face now beet red. She really was an unusual sort of girl for a woman of the forest’s edge.

Meanwhile, Lala Ruu glared from the neighboring stall, perhaps acting as a representative for Ai Fa and Reina Ruu. Even without that look, I had been trying to maintain a respectful distance from Yun Sudra. After all, even a blockhead like me could notice her longing gazes and how quickly she started blushing. And perhaps thanks to that, things with her hadn’t become as awkward as they were with Ai Fa and Lem Dom yet.

As I was considering that line of thought, Mikel stopped by with Myme for the first time in several days.

“Ah, welcome. It’s been a while, hasn’t it, Myme...?”

“Yes. Thank you again for everything you did.”

Though I had seen Mikel on several occasions, it had been five days or so for Myme, since back when they visited the forest’s edge.

“I’ve been practicing all this time in the house. And, well...if it’s all right, there’s something I’d like to have you taste-test...” Once again, Myme had brought a large woven basket with her.

I could feel the anticipation welling up in my chest. “I can’t wait. I’m assuming you used giba meat?”

“I did. And I tried it with lots of ingredients my dad bought as well,” Myme responded with a bright and sunny smile. She must have been awfully confident in the dish.

“All right, let’s head over to the wagon again. Ah, sorry, Toor Deen, but could I ask you to take charge of the stall for a moment?”

“Of course. But...” Toor Deen muttered, hanging her head a bit but then looking back up resolutely. And her gaze wasn’t fixed on me, but rather Myme. “Um... Could I give that dish a taste test as well? Just a single bite would be plenty...”

“Yes, of course! The more opinions I can get, the better!” Myme replied, her eyes shining.

“Got it,” I agreed, pulling out the sample plates that hadn’t seen much use lately. “We’ll prepare a plate for each of the stalls, so we don’t go against the customs of the forest’s edge. And then we’ll give it a taste test in turns.”

I started by borrowing Sheera Ruu from the giba burger stall, and we went over to the wagon together with Myme. As the young chef placed her woven basket atop the wagon, Gilulu and Jidura stared down at her as they chewed on leaves from the tree they were tied to.

“I’m still practicing, but I think it turned out at least a bit tastier than what I made when I visited the settlement at the forest’s edge. It’s not just giba meat...tau oil and mamaria vinegar are ingredients like wild totos too.”

At that, the two massive birds stared down at her.

“Ah ha ha, I wasn’t talking about you two,” Myme chuckled, smiling up at the totos as she unwrapped the cloth and removed the lid from a container. Instantly, a fragrant aroma filled the air.

“Oh yeah, that looks really tasty.”

Inside the deep clay dish lay grilled meat and vegetables covered in a reddish sauce. The vegetables included aria, nenon, and pula, while the cut of meat was likely sirloin. This would be my first time having a grilled meat dish Myme prepared, which only raised my expectations higher.

“Please, dig in.”



Sheera Ruu and I each transferred a bite's worth of the dish to the wooden plates I brought along.

The sweet smell from the tau oil and sugar blended with the scent of the mamaria vinegar. It undoubtedly seemed tasty, but I was also getting a sense of déjà vu somehow.

Hmm... Seems like it may be similar to the dishes I make. But, well, I guess that's natural when we're using the same ingredients, I thought to myself as I brought the dish to my mouth, and then I was struck by an even more shocking sense of déjà vu.

Without thinking, I turned and locked eyes with Sheera Ruu. She hadn't been able to hide her surprise either.

"Asuta, this dish..."

"Yeah, I had the same thought."

Simultaneously, Sheera Ruu and I turned to face Myme.

"What's the matter? Is there some sort of issue with it?" the young chef asked, her eyes opening wide in surprise.

"No, no issues. It's just, this dish..."

"Yes?"

"This dish tastes identical to one that I make."

At that, Myme's eyes opened even wider. "Really? It tastes like one of your dishes?"

"Yeah. I've been experimenting with a dish to sell to the inns that uses mamaria vinegar, and this tastes exactly like it."

This was the giba in tarapa-flavored sweet and sour sauce I had prepared the first day that Lem Dom visited the Fa house... If you just decreased the amount of tarapa used, then you would have something identical.

The sweetness from the sugar and tau oil had been adjusted so that the sourness wouldn't be too prominent. And the texture of the sauce clinging thickly to the meat and vegetables... It really was just like the second version of

the sweet and sour sauce I made using tarapa, in my efforts to introduce the unfamiliar taste of vinegar to the people of the forest's edge and the folks in the post town.

"Still, it seems to have a slightly different texture than your dish, Asuta..." Sheera Ruu stated, furrowing her brow and looking troubled. "The taste really is similar. If you told me you had made it, I would probably believe you. But the texture from this sauce seems different, don't you think...?"

"Yeah. I'm guessing she must have used poitan to add thickness. Am I right, Myme?"

"Yes, that's correct. Do you not use poitan, Asuta? I tried using gigo as well, but that added a bit too much stickiness, which is how I settled on poitan."

"I see. As for me, I dry out boiled chatchi and use the starch you can extract from it. It behaves pretty similarly to fuwano."

"Chatchi? You can make a powder like fuwano from chatchi? I've never heard of such a cooking technique before!"

Myme excitedly turned to face Mikel, but her father was just silently shaking his head. It honestly was no big surprise he wouldn't know about that, since it was essentially the method used to make potato starch.

"I really can't compete with you, Asuta!"

"Nah, it's just a bit of knowledge from my home country. It's no surprise folks living in Genos have never heard of it. Besides, I'm sure you've learned heaps of stuff I don't know from Mikel," I replied, setting down my plate and looking at Myme.

Once again, I felt a chill run down my spine. It was like my eyes had been opened. "Myme, you really are incredible. For you to be able to get this skilled at handling giba meat and mamaria vinegar after just five days... You really are my equal, if not better."

"You're overexaggerating. I'm still just..."

"Yeah, you're still only ten years old, so I'm sure you'll keep on improving by leaps and bounds. Still, I'm only just seventeen myself." Before I got too worked

up and lost my composure, I went on, “For as long as I can remember, all the way up to this year, I worked hard, studying how to cook under my old man. And I’m sure you’ll keep on learning all sorts of stuff from Mikel too. Our dishes may be real similar, but ultimately you’re not me, and Mikel isn’t my old man.”

“Right...”

“That’s what I figure will end up separating us. Our cooking techniques are a lot alike, and I’m sure we’ll end up aiming toward similar goals too, but even so, we’ll each use techniques and make dishes that the other couldn’t. That’s why I want to know what sorts of dishes you’ll create, and to show you what I make too.”

“Of course.”

“Taste isn’t a contest when it comes to cooking. There isn’t any need to determine a winner and a loser. But even if it’s not to see who’s better, I still want to compete with you, Myme,” I explained, and then scratched my head. “Ah, I think I got a little too passionate there, but that’s how I honestly feel. To sum it all up, let’s both give it our all to become full-fledged chefs.”

“Right, thank you.” Myme didn’t look bashful or doubtful at all. However, there was a bit of pride shining away in her eyes. “I can’t say that I fully understand your words just yet, but still...I want to have you eat my cooking and to try your dishes too.”

“Yup, and that’s plenty. Thanks, Myme.”

“That’s my line, Asuta,” the young chef replied with a bright smile.



The sun hit its peak not long after, and with that, Sheera Ruu and I hurried on over to The Kimyuus’s Tail. The dish of the day was tino rolls, and after preparing them as per our contract, I went ahead and also made the giba in tarapa-flavored sweet and sour sauce I was experimenting with.

“Hmm, this is definitely easier to eat than the dish from before,” Milano Mas said with a serious look on his face. “Still, maybe it’s because it’s fried in oil, but this sweet and sour giba stuff has a pretty unique flavor to it. It’s a little difficult to figure out which one my customers would prefer.”

“That’s true. And it’s not good to go changing the menu around all the time, so how about starting out by offering it as a test dish and seeing how it’s received. I’ll take on the ingredient costs, of course.”

“Hmm...”

“And actually, I’d like to have you give this dish a try too,” I said, pointing toward a small pan atop the work station. At that, the look on Milano Mas’s face grew all the more troubled.

“You want to have me eat that one too? It’s got a real strange smell to it, so I figured you were gonna take it to The Sledgehammer.”

“Well, the plan is to have it taste tested not just there, but at The Great Southern Tree and The Westerly Wind too.”

Contained within was the giba curry I had been experimenting with.

It was still ultimately a work in progress, but it was tasting a lot closer to my ideal, so I wanted to get the opinions of folks from around the post town at this stage.

“I used a lot of herbs from Sym in this dish. Do you not like herbs, Milano Mas?”

“I can’t say I use them that often. Heck, I’ve never even tried any from Sym in the first place.”

“Well, I wanted to see if this dish would work for folks like you. So if you don’t mind, could I have you give it a try?”

“I mean, if you tell me to eat it then I will, but...”

Despite the uncertain look on his face, he had still agreed, so I placed the pan on the stove to heat it up. And in no time at all, that aroma I adored filled the kitchen.

“That’s one heck of a smell. I could see folks from Sym crying tears of joy if they sniffed it.”

If that actually happened, then all of my efforts would be worth it. Plus, as my experiments continued, the impressions I got from the women of the forest’s edge were also steadily improving. Since my initial attempt, I had started

including two additional herbs. That hadn't made for much of a change to the overall aroma, but I felt it brought the taste dramatically closer to proper curry.

The flavor had strayed a bit from what you'd expect of Japanese curry, but that got me thinking. There wasn't anything equivalent to rice in Genos, so I had to accompany my recipe with baked poitan in place of naan instead. That being the case, why not go all-in and make it Indian-style curry?

In terms of ingredients, I added tarapa, myamuu, and ramam fruit. I used a pretty good amount of tarapa in place of tomato, and instead of garlic I had myamuu, which I only needed a pinch of. When I hit on the thought that some folks put tomato or garlic in their curry, I had decided to try them out.

Ramam was a type of fruit like an apple that Nail used to make chitt-pickles. The idea was to add a bit of mellowness to the wild flavor of the giba curry. I figured panam honey could be worth trying too, but that seemed like it would really throw off the cost-price ratio, so I shut that idea down.

At that point I did repeated trial and error with the ratio of the herbs, adjusted the amount of fuwano and milk fat used when making the roux, and so on. The taste had improved remarkably since that first day I tried making it.

"What do you think? It shouldn't be all that spicy." I had aimed for what I perceived to be somewhere between mild and medium spiciness.

After dipping one of the baked poitan I brought along into the freshly-heated giba curry and taking a bite, Milano Mas muttered "Hmm..." in a muffled voice. "It's a real odd taste. Not bad, but...I just can't seem to find the words," he mumbled, and then he shouted toward the kitchen's door, "Hey!"

At that, a slender girl with dark brown hair timidly peeked inside.

"Wh-What is it? Do you need something?"

"You come give this a taste too. You're better with words than I am."

With a shrug of her shoulders, the girl stepped in the kitchen. This was Milano Mas's daughter, Telia Mas, and she had been manning the reception desk after cleaning the guest rooms.

Though she still hadn't fully overcome her fear of the hunters of the forest's

edge, after several months of seeing each other face-to-face, she was now able to interact with me and the women normally. And though she was still a bit timid, that just seemed to be her nature to begin with.

“Oh, my... The smell really is overwhelming, but it’s quite tasty, isn’t it?” Telia Mas said with a faint smile. “Both the meat and the vegetables are delicious. And also...eating it is somehow making me feel hungrier.”

“Hrmm, you’re right, there. It’s like my stomach’s grumbling and demanding I hurry up and feed it.”

“That may just be the herbs from Sym at work.”

At any rate, Milano and Telia Mas didn’t seem to have outright rejected my giba curry.

What would it make me feel, if this curry aroma started drifting throughout the forest’s edge or the post town around sunset? Just the thought of it somehow got me excited.

“This is still a work in progress so it’ll be some time yet till it can be sold, but if I get it to a satisfactory level, would you consider offering it at your place?”

“Hmm, how would that work out with the other dishes? Offer three of them and alternate each day?”

“No, if at all possible, I was thinking I’d like to just prepare the base for the dish so you could cook up the meat and vegetables on your own.”

I could sauté the various spices and aria in milk fat, then knead it together with water and fuwano flour. If I could take the result, dry it out, and solidify it, it should be possible to sell it as a curry base. Or at least, that was the plan.

“You may be able to make this dish tasty with kimyuus or karon meat, but I feel it’s best suited to giba meat. Or at the very least, you can make a stronger stock that way than with skinless kimyuus or karon leg meat.”

Plus, just on a personal level, I felt like pork ribs were best suited to curry. Naturally, some folks out there preferred beef or chicken, but that all just came down to personal tastes.

“Back in my home country, this dish was an absolute staple. I’m honestly sort

of looking forward to seeing just how well it'll be accepted in the post town."

"Hmm... Well, for now, let's just wait until you've perfected it."

Feeling heartened by that not at all negative response, I went ahead and departed from The Kimyuus's Tail.

And so, as I held the lidded pan, I walked down the street alongside Sheera Ruu. Since the pan was on the small side, it wasn't difficult to carry like that, but I didn't want to bump into anyone and give them a burn, so I still needed to be careful.

"So are we going to go around to the other inns now?"

"Yeah. I'm sure Nail will be happy with it, but I'm not so sure about Naudis. After all, southerners have a strong aversion to the culture of Sym. And I'm really looking forward to seeing how The Westerly Wind's owner will react..."

"Every time I try it, I grow more and more fond of the taste. So I think even among westerners and southerners, plenty will find it tasty," Sheera Ruu replied with a gentle smile. "I really believe this dish is characteristic of you, Asuta. I can't even imagine someone like that Myme girl creating it."

"Right. As long as there isn't something similar in Sym or the castle town already, I'd be really surprised if someone else stumbled on this combination of herbs by coincidence."

"And that girl will use knowledge and techniques you're unaware of to make dishes that are characteristic of her, right?" She paused. "Asuta, I honestly can't help but feel a little vexed..."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"The people of the forest's edge don't possess any techniques of our own for making delicious meals. Everything that we've learned has come from you. I'm sure Reina Ruu and I will never be able to stand side by side with you or that girl..."

As we walked along, I turned and faced Sheera Ruu. Her expression was perfectly calm, but there was a pained look in her eyes.

I shook my head and said, "That's not true. The people of the forest's edge

have their own unique tastes and preferences too. So you can form your own knowledge and techniques by trying the dishes Myme and I make and adjusting them to be just right for you. I have my home country's techniques that were formed over a very long period of time and Myme learned from Mikel's experience from the castle town, but right now is the time for the people of the forest's edge to create your own style, right?"

"The time to create our own?"

"That's right. Don't you think you could create your own new sort of cuisine using what you learn from me and Myme? If you pass that knowledge to your children and your children's children and so on, you'll create dishes that are unique to the forest's edge along the way."

"That's so grandiose it's dizzying..." Sheera Ruu replied, placing her hands over her chest and giving a deep sigh. "I definitely need to offer my gratitude to the forest that I was on duty at the stalls today. I'll of course tell her of everything you said, but I'm certain Reina Ruu will lament the fact that she wasn't able to be here for this..."

"You're seriously exaggerating there... Still, it definitely makes me glad to hear it."

I couldn't help but feel that today was somehow special. The twenty-sixth of the black month... I decided to make a firm note of that date. When you added the fact that it was Dan Rutim's birthday, it really felt like an occasion to celebrate.

2

After that, the plan was to circle around to the other inns in order of distance. And that meant first up was The Great Southern Tree, which was along the main highway.

"Hmmm, so you say you made this dish with herbs from Sym?" As someone with mixed blood from the south, it was no real surprise that Naudis's reaction to that news wasn't especially positive.

It went without saying that Jagar and Sym were enemy nations. But as folks

from Sym tended to be rather aloof by nature, they had neither a strong interest in nor aversion to the culture of Jagar, which meant they readily accepted dishes using ingredients like tau oil and sugar. But folks from Jagar tended to turn a cold shoulder toward easterners. As a richly expressive people, they absolutely couldn't stand how aloof the people of Sym were.

And so, there was a definite tendency among southerners to shirk Sym culture in general. Even though he was officially a citizen of the west, Naudis's father was from Jagar, and so it seemed he wouldn't accept the idea of a dish using herbs from Sym quite so easily.

"Asuta, I really don't think I need to remind you at this point, but..."

"The majority of your customers at The Great Southern Tree are from Jagar, right? So would serving a dish using herbs from Sym make them angry?"

"That's right. Or more than that, I'd imagine I hardly have any customers who would order a dish from Sym in the first place. It's just like how northern cuisine wouldn't really be welcomed here in the west."

"Right. But Polarth of the house of Daleim said he wants Genos to be known as a town renowned for its delicious cuisine, didn't he? I don't know how realistic that plan actually is, but for now, you can at least easily get ahold of ingredients that used to be only available in the castle town. And I think that's a wonderful thing."

It wasn't as if I was trying to lecture Naudis or anything. I just figured I would try pointing out a different way of looking at things.

"Besides, from what I hear, they've been making use of tau oil and sugar over at The Sledgehammer. There aren't many towns out there where you can find ingredients from both Sym and Jagar, so you could make even more customers happy by using that fact to create dishes unique to Genos...or at least, that's what the owner Nail said."

"Hrmm..."

"I'd imagine other inns frequented by easterners are probably thinking the same way too. Tau oil and sugar are easy to use to begin with, so they seem to get a lot more buyers than reten oil or mamaria vinegar."

“That’s for sure. Tau oil and sugar are both wonderful ingredients, after all,” Naudis replied with a puff of his chest. It seemed he really did have a strong pride in his father’s homeland.

“I’m certain the quality of cooking on offer at those inns is going to improve by leaps and bounds. But that’s only natural when they have access to ingredients from Sym, Jagar, and Selva. And the owners of those inns with ties to easterners can learn from their customers how to use any unfamiliar herbs from Sym.”

“Hrmm...”

“That’s why it feels like a waste to me for someone in a position like yours to avoid ingredients from Sym. You’ve been one step ahead of other inn owners when it comes to learning how to skillfully handle ingredients from Jagar, so normally that would give you at least the same level of advantage as Nail, who’s knowledgeable when it comes to herbs.”

“Hrmm!” Naudis muttered as he pondered the matter.

Of the countless innkeepers out there, Naudis was the very first one to approach me about handling my giba cooking at his place. In addition to the foresight he possessed, I also figured he was just as dedicated a businessman as Diel’s father.

Having only been in this world for a few months now, I didn’t exactly have a firm grasp on the state of affairs in each nation or the sentiments of their citizens. But I did at least think that Naudis here could arrive at a proper path forward if he weighed his animosity toward Sym against the potential profits to be earned.

“It’s true... If the inns serving customers from Sym ended up with the best cooking in Genos, that would really get my blood boiling.”

“Yeah, I can certainly see that.”

“Sym and Jagar have been enemy nations for a long, long time. I really loved and respected my late father, so I’m not exactly fond of those easterners he saw as hated enemies. But in Selva territory, folks from Jagar and Sym are forbidden from feuding. And out of all the domains in Selva, Genos has more

interaction between easterners and southerners than anywhere else, so I could certainly see it being an ideal place for inventing new sorts of dishes,” Naudis stated, nodding several times along the way. “Your words have definitely left a deep impression on me. But it’s not an issue I can give you an easy answer on... For now, though, could I try that dish using those herbs from Sym?”

“Thanks, of course I’d love for you to have some.”

And so for the second time, I heated up the pan. I had just heated it a little while ago at The Kimyuus’s Tail, so it didn’t take long for it to get hot.

The powerful aroma that soon arose caused Naudis’s face to wrinkle up even more than Milano Mas’s...but when he took a bite, his eyes lit up.

“This is delicious...”

“Really? The owner of The Kimyuus’s Tail called it an odd taste.”

“It’s incredibly good. I can’t help but acknowledge that fact.”

“Thank you. Still, it feels like it’s lacking something or other, so I was thinking I’d try adding tau oil and sugar.”

“I see. Then it would be a dish that openly embraced ingredients from the west, south, and east all at once.” At that, Naudis crossed his arms and thought. “Hmm...! Asuta, I predict that this dish will end up as something incredible. And if you intend to sell it to other inns, that’s not something I can just overlook.”

“I’m honored to hear you say that.”

“Jagar has more ingredients to its name than just tau oil, sugar, and panam honey. There are vegetables you don’t see often in Selva, and all sorts of rare ingredients as well. I’ve been hoping so much that they would start flowing into the post town too...and I’m certain there’s one in particular that would go well with this dish.” At that, Naudis gave a hearty, resolute nod. “Once you finish this dish, I would like to be able to have some as a sample for my shop. I’d need to have my customers from the south try it before I could figure out if they’d actually accept it, after all.”



Next in line was The Sledgehammer. And at that inn, my curry received open

praise.

“This is delicious. I’m sure every last one of my customers from the east will enjoy it. If you don’t mind, I would love to start offering it immediately.”

“I appreciate the sentiment, but I still haven’t perfected it just yet, so I ask that you hold off for a little while longer.”

“Of course. If you’ll offer up a dish even tastier than this, then I’m prepared to wait as long as it takes.”

As per the customs of the east, Nail tried not to let his emotions show, but I could see the expectation shining bright in his eyes.

“I’m sure the other inn owners won’t take this lying down. There are a number of inns out there that are frequented by easterners, and they’re all eager to offer your cooking, Asuta.”

“Really? I haven’t had any inns come to me with new job offers yet, though.”

“For now, everyone must be focusing on the idea that with all those ingredients flowing in from the castle town, they can make high-class dishes without relying on you or giba meat. But before long, they’ll realize that isn’t enough to compete.”

That was certainly some excessive praise.

But really, I had no choice but to stay competitive with all the other options out there, despite how expensive my giba cooking had become, so I needed to keep on striving my hardest without ever letting myself grow conceited.

“Ah, by the way, thanks for introducing me to that customer of yours the other day. It looks like I’ll be able to get ahold of the tools I need to make sausages.”

“I see. So you got a funnel?”

“Yeah. They use wooden ones in the post town, which is why I wasn’t able to find any from the metalworkers.”

The edges of Nail’s lips trembled, so it seemed he was holding back a smile. “I purchase my fruit wine in barrels, so I use a wooden funnel every day. But I mistakenly thought you needed a metal one, which is why I didn’t say

anything.”

“I’m pretty embarrassed about the miscommunication. Wooden funnels can be made in a way that they’re real easy to use, so I definitely appreciate having one.”

“So now you’ll be able to make giba sausages, correct?” Nail asked calmly, but he was unable to hide his excitement as he leaned forward. “When I journeyed to Sym in the past, I had the chance to eat gyama sausages. They tasted so good that I’m certain they would be a fine addition to a proper meal rather than just something made for traveling. I’ll be very interested to see just what sort of sausages can be made with giba meat rather than gyama.”

“Right. If I can get them to work, I’d love to have you do a taste test.”

Mikel had already told us what preparations we needed to make for smoking meat. That included the amount of salt to use when pickling it and for how long, as well as what herbs to use in addition, and how to desalt and air-dry the meat. Now we were just waiting for him to visit the forest’s edge to give it a try for real.

“Well then, sorry for hurrying things, but we’ll be off. We’re trying to stop by The Westerly Wind too before work wraps up at the stalls, after all.”

“Right. I’ll look forward to working with you again tomorrow.”

And so, we exited The Sledgehammer with our pan.

We still had Dan Rutim’s birthday banquet waiting after all this, so it really was a hectic day. But, well, I’m the one who made the schedule myself, and besides, it was a good sort of hectic.

“The giba curry has earned a favorable reception at all the inns so far, hasn’t it? But there’s still a chance it could be most poorly suited to the tastes of westerners, I suppose.” Sheera Ruu meekly thought aloud.

“I doubt it,” I responded, tilting my head. “Considering the reaction it got from Milano Mas’s daughter, that shouldn’t be the case, but it’s really hard to make a judgment call at the moment.”

“I see. Well, if you just give it time, I’m certain everyone will recognize how

delicious it is,” Sheera Ruu said with a smile. “Everyone back home has fallen in love with the taste in just a couple days, so I know it will work out. And it’s also a fact that it’s been getting tastier day by day too... I’m sure this dish will be greatly welcomed at the Rutim banquet too.”

“Right. I’ll be really happy if that’s the case.”

Around then, we arrived at our final destination for the day: The Westerly Wind, which was located along a somewhat lawless backstreet.

“Welcome. We’ve been waiting for you, Asuta,” Yumi called out with a bright smile from behind the reception desk. I had let her know in the morning that we would be stopping by. “Mom! Asuta’s here, so could you take over for me?”

“Yes, yes. You know, you don’t need to shout like that for me to hear you... Welcome, Asuta. My husband’s waiting for you.”

Yumi’s mother was a small woman, but one with a firm physique.

Her name was Sill, and just like Yumi she had dark brown hair. Her skin was a bit on the darker side, while Yumi’s was ivory white, so she must have gotten that from her father.

“Well then, pardon us.”

Still holding the pan, whose contents had grown quite a bit lighter, I stepped into the kitchen behind the reception desk. Yumi’s mom must have been cooking up till now, as there was a large pot atop a flame on one of the two stoves inside.

“Huh? Where’d dad get to? Hey, Asuta’s here!”

“Quiet, you. It’s not like I summoned him or anything, you know.”

At that, the door further into the kitchen opened and a large figure stepped inside. This was Yumi’s father and the owner of The Westerly Wind, Sams. The man had come here from another town at a young age. His hair was black and his skin pale, he had dark brown eyes and a brawny build, and he looked to be somewhere around forty. Apparently, he used to do some rather violent work for a living, as he had old white scars running along his neck and arms. He really was remarkably well built for a westerner, with an especially broad chest.

“My nose is feeling all itchy somehow. So that weird smelling thing is the dish you want us to try out?”

“That’s right. I hope it’s to your tastes.”

Keeping in mind how Sams wasn’t exactly fond of small talk, I hurriedly went ahead and borrowed a stove. And since there was so little of the giba curry left by this point, it soon started bubbling and giving off steam.

“This dish uses herbs from Sym, so I believe it should offer plenty of nourishment.”

“Never mind that. What really matters is first, the taste, and second, how well it pairs with wine. If it can’t pass those tests, then none of our customers will order it no matter how much you talk it up.”

“As you can probably tell from the smell, it’s a spicy dish, so I’m sure it would go well with alcohol.”

“Hmph, that isn’t exactly convincing coming from a guy who doesn’t drink.”

“Jeez! Why do you always have to be so mean to Asuta, dad?” Yumi said with a strained grin, giving her father’s large shoulders a shove.

“Hmph,” Sams once again snorted. Even for a westerner, he had been especially scornful toward the people of the forest’s edge. When Yumi asked around to find out exactly why that was, when he wasn’t even born in Genos, she found out that, apparently, when he was young, his friend got into a fight with someone from the forest. That friend had gotten drunk and started badmouthing the people of the forest’s edge, only to be one-sidedly beaten to a pulp.

Naturally, the friend was at fault there, but thanks to having both arms broken he lost his job and ultimately ended up dying by the roadside, so Sams started hating the people of the forest’s edge. And since that incident had happened back when Cyclopeus was acting as representative for Genos, the man from the forest’s edge faced no punishment for the use of excessive violence, which only fanned the flames of Sams’s anger further.

And yet, Yumi had worked hard to convince him to offer my cooking at The Westerly Wind. And thanks to his daughter’s influence, Sams was now working

together with the people of the forest's edge despite having such a bad impression of them. My encounter with Yumi really was an irreplaceable event in my life.

"All right, it looks good and heated. Please go ahead and dip this baked poitan in and give it a try."

"Wow, that sure is one heck of a smell! It definitely has the feel of Sym cooking, that's for sure." Naturally, Yumi was the first one to go for it. And when she dipped the baked poitan into the giba curry and timidly gave it a bite, she excitedly proclaimed, "Wow! It's not as spicy as I was expecting. Considering the smell, I figured it would leave my tongue all numb."

"Right. I prepared the portion for The Sledgehammer to be spicier, but I figured it was best to keep it around this level for everyone else."

"Hmm? I figure it could stand to have more spice. I've honestly come to really like spicy food thanks to eating those dishes with chitt in them at The Sledgehammer." As she had just reminded me, Yumi had experience eating my giba dishes from all the various inns.

And when he similarly took a bite of giba curry, Sams made a strange "Hrngg..." sound.

"Well? It's not bad, right? I rather like it, myself."

"That's because you're used to eating dishes from Sym."

"That's true, but still, doesn't this smell make you feel all hungry?"

After scratching his head for a bit, Sams gave his daughter a rough slap on the back.

"Go trade places with Sill. Your impressions aren't exactly helping."

"Hey, if something's tasty, then what's wrong with coming out and saying so?" Yumi retorted with a slump of her shoulders, before leaving the kitchen. In her place, her mother soon appeared.

"Ha ha, this certainly has an incredible smell. I caught a whiff of it even from outside the room," Sill chuckled, fearlessly snatching a baked poitan. Then when she dipped it in the giba curry and took a bite, her eyes opened wide in

surprise. “Oh, my... It’s not half bad. Hmm, so this is a Sym-style dish, is it?”

“Yes. Or to be more precise, it’s a dish from my home country made using herbs from Sym.”

“I see. To be honest, we get plenty of customers from Sym here too. We don’t get many from Jagar, but, I mean, folks from Sym use some strange powers, so they don’t fear the ruffians around these parts. Thanks to that, a lot of solo travelers from Sym use cheap inns like ours.” At that, she crossed her plump arms and tilted her head, deep in thought. “Still, herbs from Sym are more expensive than myamuu and the like, aren’t they? Is this dish really going to be cheap enough for us to sell in the first place?”

“Well, it’s true that it may end up a bit more expensive compared to other dishes, but if you make it like a soup, I believe that should keep the cost down.”

“Like a soup? You mean cut this with hot water?”

“That’s right. If you portion out the giba stock and add a bit of seasoning, I don’t believe the taste would be affected. Once I perfect the baseline flavor, I was figuring I’d start experimenting with that. And as you can tell, it’s a dish with a strong flavor to it, so you could also go with a smaller amount for a cheaper price, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, you may be right. Still, you really think we can make an odd dish like this on our own?”

The Westerly Wind had been purchasing fresh giba meat rather than my dishes. Still, when it came to this giba curry, I was telling all of the inns the same thing.

“That won’t be an issue. I should be able to make the base for the flavor on my end, and then you would just need to pair it with boiled vegetables and meat. It wouldn’t be tricky in the least.”

“I see. In that case, it could be worth giving a try,” Sill replied.

“Hey,” Sams interjected, looking displeased. “Should you really go saying something like that so lightly? It’s possible none of our customers will even try ordering something with such a stench to begin with.”

“If that happens, we can just stop buying it, right? But we’ll never know without giving it a shot.” Sill herself was the proper heir to The Westerly Wind, while Sams had married into the family. And as a dyed-in-wool businesswoman, Sill gave a dauntless grin and continued, “There’s value to trying it out, I’d say. After all, I’ve never eaten anything like it before. Now, because of that, I can’t say for certain if it’s good or not, but a dish as unusual as this one is sure to get folks talking. And all the dishes Asuta taught us up till now have made our customers happy, so I can’t see any reason to just reject the idea without even trying.”

With a frown, Sams once again scratched his head. “But when I ate it, my head started feeling weirdly itchy. Are you sure these herbs from Sym aren’t poison or anything?”

“Ah, that’s probably down to some sweating. But sweating is good for your body and lowers your body temperature, so I think a dish like this is well suited to a land as warm as Genos.”

“You’re not just knowledgeable, but a real good businessman too, Asuta,” Sill said with a grin, and then she leaned in close to whisper in my ear. “Honestly, I’d love to have you marry Yumi. Then our inn would have a nice peaceful future ahead of it.”

“Hey, don’t go cutting your husband out of the conversation like that.”

“Aw, don’t be so petty. Anyway, you can take what I just said as a joke, but I’m still really looking forward to seeing how this dish turns out, Asuta.”

“Right, thank you.”

With that, we went to exit The Westerly Wind. According to my internal clock, I figured we were getting pretty close to our time limit. After leaving the kitchen, we found a rather bored-looking Yumi resting her chin in her hands at the reception desk, only for her to break out into a smile when she saw us.

“Ah, you’re leaving already? I’d like to really take some time and chat with you eventually, Asuta!”

“Right. See you again tomorrow. And thanks for everything today.”

When we made it back out to the uncrowded main road, I gave a sigh. At least

for now, our mission in the post town was complete.

“Work’s been really packed lately, hasn’t it?” Sheera Ruu asked after being silent for all that time we were at The Westerly Wind. “You’ve been experimenting not just on the curry, but on a dish using the giba’s head as well, right? And then on top of that, there’s the sausages and jerky, and preparing for the banquet in the castle town... And you’re even trying to make that new dish that mixes poitan and fuwano, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. I’ve been putting most of my efforts toward the giba curry lately, but I intend to go back to that soon.”

“That’s amazing. I can’t imagine ever handling that much work at once.”

“Really? It’s not any real burden, I’d say.”

Still, I may have been getting a little ahead of myself by having the giba curry taste tested before it was finished. Between the meeting with Myme and the whole thing with Varkas, who I still hadn’t met, I was definitely getting worked up.

The leading clan heads had already given their approval for the banquet in the castle town. And tomorrow, we were scheduled to visit the Turan manor in order to check out ingredients. Plus, from what I was told by a messenger, it seemed that Varkas would be stopping in as well.

In other words, I would finally be coming face to face with that chef whose skills even Mikel acknowledged. When you added the fact that I would eventually be manning the stove on the same day as him, I couldn’t help but get excited. My encounter with Myme had granted me strength. So just what would I get out of meeting Varkas?

In addition to all that, I was looking forward to Mikel teaching us how to smoke meat too. So no matter how hectic the days lately had become, it was a fact that I was really enjoying them too.

“Still, first up is Dan Rutim’s celebration. The stalls should be wrapping up business shortly, so we should all hurry back together, Sheera Ruu.”

“Right.” She nodded to me, and we set off walking.

After all, this long, long day was still only about halfway done.

3

After wrapping up work in the post town, our first task when we returned to the Ruu settlement was handling the prep work for business tomorrow. After speeding through that in around thirty minutes, we headed over to the Rutim settlement.

Accompanying me were the Rutim clan members Tsuvai and Ama Min Rutim, Reina and Sheera Ruu from the Ruu clan, and finally Toor Deen and Lem Dom, making for six women in total. Yun Sudra wanted to accompany us so badly it looked like she would break down crying, but Li Sudra said, “We have work back home to handle,” with a smile, and they headed back to their own house.

“Sorry, looks like in the end I had to ask you all to help out,” I called out while driving the wagon.

“It’s what we wanted to do,” Reina Ruu replied with a smile. It seemed she had completely recovered from the emotional damage caused by Leeheim a few days back.

Adding the Rutim women to this group would make it an even more impressive lineup. As for cooking time, we had roughly three hours. I intended to use that time to its fullest to prepare something that would bring Dan Rutim joy.

“Welcome, Asuta of the Fa clan,” the elder Raa Rutim greeted me as we arrived at the Rutim settlement.

There was a bit of white hair on his otherwise bald head, his build was slim and tall, and he had piercing eyes like a hawk. Aside from his height and baldness, this former head of the main Rutim house really didn’t resemble his son at all.

“The men are still out in the forest, but the women are waiting for you in the kitchen. I have difficulty with the fact that we are leaving the stove to the Fa clan when we lack blood ties to you, but as it’s the clan head’s decision, it’s not my place to interject.”

“Ah, the Rutim are precious friends to our clan, so I’m glad to take on the task.”

“Yes, I have no intention of objecting to the clan head declaring friendship between our clans,” Raa Rutim nodded, a stern look on his face all the while. “At any rate, you have our thanks. Ama Min, Tsuvai, show Asuta to the kitchen.”

“Understood.”

And so as I led Gilulu by the reins, we headed for the kitchen. Raa Rutim stayed behind, apparently giving a young group of children some form of swordsmanship training.

“After he retired from hunting five years ago, training the children has become our elder Raa’s primary job,” Ama Min Rutim told me with a gentle expression.

“I see. That’s wonderful, isn’t it?”

“Yes. It’s only been a few months now since I married into the Rutim, but I love and respect everyone here just as much as I do my family in the Min clan.”

“Ah, Asuta, and everyone else too. Welcome to the Rutim settlement,” Morun Rutim greeted with a beaming grin as we entered the kitchen. “We cut up the meat just as you instructed, and the poitan have all been baked. And we’ve gathered the necessary vegetables and seasonings here as well.”

“Thanks. In that case, could I have you two handle the branch house stoves as planned, Reina and Sheera Ruu?”

We were preparing food for nearly fifty people, so we had planned to split up into groups right from the start.

There were thirteen Rutim women in total, and I split things up so that Reina and Sheera Ruu were assigned five each, while I got the other three along with Toor Deen and Lem Dom. Reina Ruu’s group was to assist Ama Min Rutim with the soup dish, Sheera Ruu was helping Morun Rutim with the meat and vegetable stir-fry, and Toor Deen and I were taking care of the special dishes for the night. I was secretly proud of how perfectly I got it all laid out.

“It’s been some time, Asuta,” one of the women in my group said to me,

gracefully stepping forward.

“Yeah, it has,” I smiled back.

It was Tsuvai’s mother, Oura. I hadn’t seen her since the interrogation in the castle town, so it had been over two months since we last met.

She then turned to face someone else. “You too, Lem Dom. I believe it has been nearly a year now since I last saw you.”

“Ah, you were the wife of the Suun clan’s head, weren’t you? Sorry, but I don’t recall your name.”

“My name is Oura. I’ve already heard how you feel about us from Tsuvai, but I hope that we can still carry out our work together.”

“Yes, agreed,” Lem Dom curtly replied, with a shrug of her robust shoulders.

Tsuvai had a look about her like she wanted to say something, but since she was in Sheera Ruu’s group she wasn’t able to stay here. Though she and Oura were both living in the Rutim settlement, their familial bonds had been severed.

At some point Dan Rutim had whispered to me that Tsuvai was secretly suffering quite a bit because she was forbidden from calling Oura her mother any longer. And he had also said that if someday she could overcome that sadness and start to consider the Rutim to be just as precious to her as her previous family, she would finally be given the Rutim name.

“Now that I think about it, I still haven’t seen Dan Rutim. Is he running around somewhere on his tolos again?”

“That’s right. He said that since he would keep snatching bites if he was hanging around the settlement, he would stay away until sunset,” Oura replied with a relaxed smile.

Though she was a very delicate and gentle woman, she seemed the least shaken up by the fall of the Suun out of all its former members, except Yamiru Lea. And so I figured she had the same sort of quiet strength about her that I also sensed in Ama Min Rutim and Li Sudra.

Plus, she’s Tei Suun’s daughter.

Tei Suun had been the final great criminal from his clan. When he tried to do

me harm, Raielfam Sudra struck him down. That normally would have been impossible for the former members of the Suun clan to bear, even if it was what he wished for... In fact, that might have made it even worse. And yet Oura had shaken all that off and was now smiling at me like this.

With that thought firmly in mind, I told Oura, "I look forward to working with you," with a bow. "Well then, let's get to cooking. First up is the giba curry."

Thanks to Dan Rutim's positive impression back on the first day I made it, I decided to make this a special dish on offer tonight despite the fact that it was still a work in progress. Though it would just be a small serving per person, we had enough folks attending that we had to fill a pot up with a hefty batch of the dish.

"How amazing... To think that you would need this much food to celebrate the clan head's birthday. Such a thing would be unimaginable in the Deen clan," Toor Deen mused as she cut up the rib meat prepared earlier by Morun Rutim and the other Rutim women into the appropriate size.

As I instructed Lem Dom on how to cut the chatchi and nenon, I replied, "Right. There are twenty-seven members of this clan alone, aren't there? Actually, is that even more than the Zaza?"

"Yes. There are only twenty people in the Zaza clan, I believe. But the northern settlement of the Zaza, Dom, and Jeen are all joined together."

"The entirety of the northern settlement all together should total over forty. And there are a lot of young folks too, so we wouldn't fall short in terms of hunters." Lem Dom joined in with a cynical grin. "Now that I think about it, there are quite a few older folks in the Ruu and Rutim, aren't there? Have you noticed that, Toor Deen?"

"Well, I don't really know much about those things in general, but that man from before was probably the oldest I've ever seen."

"That's proof of the strength of their subordinate clans. It was a real surprise to learn that the clan head of the Ruu from two generations back was still alive."

"The clan head from two generations back? But the current one is the leading

clan head Donda Ruu, right...? Isn't he around the same age as Gulaf Zaza?"

"Yes, so the clan head from two generations ago is over eighty. But, well, she's a woman rather than a man."

"Eighty... I've never seen anyone that old, not even a woman," Toor Deen replied, her eyes widening in shock.

Despite Lem Dom's fierce look, Toor Deen had completely opened up to her. The older girl had a surprisingly friendly side too, and both fell under the Zaza and shared ties of blood, so perhaps both sides felt comfortable opening up their hearts to one another.



“Lem Dom, have you not met Jiba Ruu?” I asked.

“Of course I’ve seen her. I’m staying at the Ruu settlement, so do you really think I could have avoided introducing myself to the elder? Still, Jiba Ruu is over eighty?”

“Yeah. From what I recall, I believe she’s eighty-five.”

“Eighty-five! That’s certainly a shock,” Lem Dom remarked, breaking out in a grin as she poured the freshly-cut chatchi into a pot. “Someone who has lived that long can’t do any work and is just a waste of food... At least, that’s what plenty of the rougher men from up north probably think.”

“Hmph. I hope you don’t think that way too.”

“I don’t. I mean, people should live nice long lives, right? Considering he had to become clan head at the age of just fifteen, I’m certain Deek feels the same way.”

Now that she mentioned it, the main Dom house she belonged to only had two members. Considering she was only fifteen now, Lem Dom obviously lost her parents far too soon.

“That’s true,” I agreed, “I lost my mother when I was little, so I definitely understand that feeling. By the way, how old is your clan head Deek Dom now anyway?”

“He’s the same age as you.”

“Huh?” I quickly glanced all around, wondering just who that “you” referred to. But the Rutim women were all diligently working, so nobody else seemed to be participating in the conversation.

“What are you looking around for? You said you were seventeen, didn’t you, Asuta?”

“S-Seventeen?”

My hands came to a stop without thinking. And in turn, Lem Dom started pouting at me.

“You seem just as surprised as Ludo Ruu. Does my clan head really look *that*

old?”

“No, but, well... It’d be rude to say anything else, so let’s just drop it.”

“Those words alone are already plenty rude, you know. They’ll make for a nice souvenir to bring back for Deek.”

“Gah, don’t even joke about that! If I make him upset with me, then I won’t even know how to behave around him.”

Lem Dom gave an amused chuckle. And the resulting smile was rather cute, especially considering she had a nice face to begin with.

“It’s true that my clan head is similar in strength to Gulaf Zaza despite his young age. In the contests of strength held during festivals of the hunt, the last one standing is always either Deek or Gulaf Zaza, after all... I’m quite proud of my brother.”

“Yeah, Deek Dom sounds like a really fantastic hunter.”

“That’s why I can’t help but admire Ai Fa, who possesses similar strength. She’s everything I aspire to,” Lem Dom stated, her eyes ecstatically narrowing.

If Ai Fa were here, I’m sure we would have had another commotion on our hands, but personally I found even that expression of Lem Dom’s quite likable. Though she tended to go a bit heavy on the physical contact, I could never hate someone who was so open about praising my clan head.

As we were having that exchange, a mountain of sliced meat and vegetables had piled up atop the work station. “All right, I figure that should take care of the meat and vegetables. Toor Deen, could I ask you to start boiling everything?”

“Of course.”

While she was handling that, I went about making the roux. I had already taken care of mixing and dry roasting the herbs back home, so all I needed to add was milk fat, aria, and fuwano. Taking pity on everyone’s noses, I had Lem Dom help me move the whole pot to the outdoor stove. And that was when I spotted a group of Rutim hunters approaching with several dead giba.

“Ah, Asuta. Thank you so much for helping out today.”

“Long time no see, Gazraan Rutim!” It had been roughly a month or so now since we last met.

With a soft smile on his masculine face, Gazraan Rutim came over and stopped in front of me.

“I want to talk with Asuta for a bit, so could you handle the skinning?”

“Understood.” The one to respond was the head of a branch house, Gazraan Rutim’s younger brother. With a smile as gentle as his big brother’s, he gave me a bow, then departed along with the other hunters.

There was one large giba that needed two hunters to carry it, as well as two smaller ones. It seemed that they had cleared the day’s quota for their clan of twenty-seven.

“I believe we were successful at bloodletting the two small ones. You mentioned you would like to use the neck and head in today’s banquet, didn’t you, Asuta?”

“Yes. I don’t think there will be enough for everyone, but I would love to try it, if that’s all right.”

It was time for a revenge match when it came to cooking brains and eyeballs. For the past five days, I had borrowed the assistance of the nearby clans in order to experiment.

“I’m definitely interested to see what sort of dish you will prepare. Our clan head Dan’s carefree decision to entrust you with this important task has brought great joy to the members of our clan.”

Even after more than a month, Gazraan Rutim hadn’t changed a bit. If anything, his relaxed nature—like that of a great, dignified tree—felt as if it had only been polished further.

A moment later, that gentle gaze of his suddenly turned toward Lem Dom. “You’re Lem Dom of the main Dom house, are you not? I’m the eldest son of the main Rutim house, Gazraan Rutim.”

“Yes, I’ve heard plenty about you around the Ruu settlement, Gazraan Rutim,” Lem Dom replied, a somewhat challenging look in her eyes. Gazraan

Rutim, however, simply met it with his familiar gentle smile.

“You’re helping prepare for the banquet, aren’t you? It makes me very happy to think that the bonds between the clans under the Ruu and those of you from the north are growing stronger.”

“That’s true. The former leading Suun clan treated the Ruu and their related clans as enemies without just cause, so I believe we should do what we can to correct the relationship we share.”

“Please enjoy the coming banquet as our guest. I have my own work to carry out as well, so I’ll be taking my leave now, Asuta. I’ll have the giba heads delivered to the main house’s kitchen later.”

“Right, thank you.”

With yet another gentle smile, Gazraan Rutim departed. Lem Dom watched his back grow distant with a formidable light gleaming in her eyes.

“He certainly was quite composed. Personally, I prefer more earnestly open men like Dan Rutim.”

“I see. Both of them are very important people in my life.”

“Hmph. That eldest Ruu son is a mysterious person too... It seems there are quite a few strange men under the Ruu,” Lem Dom observed with a shrug of her shoulders. “Ah, was that perhaps disrespectful toward the Ruu and Rutim heirs? Still, I can’t help who I don’t like.”

“I suppose that’s true. But just like with food, if you spend enough time with people, your impression of them can change. Just like Dan Rutim said, you’re free to like and dislike whomever you want, but you also need to be ready to look at the long term,” I stated as I sautéed a large helping of aria in milk fat.

As she picked up the plate loaded with spices, Lem Dom’s lips twisted into a grin as she replied, “Hmm? Then you’re saying I may come to appreciate not only Jiza Ruu and Gazraan Rutim, but also that sweet boiled dish you make?”

“It’s *possible*, at least. At any rate, it’d be a shame to not even consider the possibility on account of your first impression.”

“And have you ever had one of your so-called ‘first impressions’ overturned?”

“Yeah, plenty of times. In particular, Donda Ruu treated me like a boil or something at the start, and, well, I’d say we both had just about the worst possible first impression of one another.”

And though things were as chilly as ever with Jiza Ruu, I didn’t feel as negatively as I used to about Darmu Ruu, and I felt like I had gotten rather close to the members of the Fou and Ran. When I thought about how far I had come, it moved me deeply.

“Now that I think about it, back when I first met Dan Rutim, he shouted at me and got super angry, asking what I was thinking serving giba torso meat for a celebration.”

“Ah, you mean how eating such smelly meat was seen as a sign of a clan’s weakness? Up north, we ate whatever cut we pleased, regardless of smell.”

“Really? Still, I am seriously glad that I’ve built up such a good relationship with him. Now he’ll even eat eyeballs and brains I’ve prepared without any concern,” I replied, only for Lem Dom to give a doubtful look as she brought her face in closer. There was almost a ten centimeter height difference between us, though, so she ended up bending forward a bit. “What is it? And do you mind handing over that plate, by the way?”

“Ah, here. It’s just...I know it’s silly to be saying so at this point, but you really were born in another country, weren’t you, Asuta?”

“Yeah, that really is late to be asking. As you can see, I wasn’t born here at the forest’s edge.”

“Right. Black hair and eyes aren’t especially rare at the northern settlement, but there aren’t any people of the forest’s edge with skin so pale. Honestly, though, you never seemed all that much like a foreigner to me... Even though the first time I heard about you, I thought the idea of taking an outsider into one’s house was ridiculous.”

“Hmm? So you’re saying I’m fitting in naturally as a person of the forest’s edge?”

“Yes. Perhaps I’ve been caught up in the way that the people around you all treat your presence as entirely natural,” Lem Dom suggested, brushing aside

the bangs dangling over her cheek. “Well, whatever. There’s no point in trying to treat someone as suspicious when they’re not. But if you were, then I wouldn’t be able to stand the fact that you were staying by Ai Fa’s side.”

“Ah ha ha, you really are devoted to Ai Fa, aren’t you?”

“Of course I am. If you ever do anything to sadden her, I’ll never forgive you,” she growled with a scary look in her eyes, bringing her face in even closer. Still, even that action made me feel glad.

“I’m really happy to hear that there are more people out there now who will say stuff like that on Ai Fa’s behalf, Lem Dom. I’m in no position to talk about the whole hunter thing, but I hope that you’ll keep on thinking kindly of her.”

“I don’t need you to tell me that. Still, if only I didn’t have to return to the Ruu settlement today... I wish that I had just asked my clan head to stay with the Fa the whole time from the start,” Lem Dom lamented, sadly wrapping her arms around her own muscular body.

At any rate, the start of Dan Rutim’s birthday celebration was drawing steadily nearer.

4

And so the sun set, and with that came the solemn start of the birthday banquet.

“Our clan head Dan Rutim has lived for forty-one whole years as of today. It is a great joy to those of us who are part of his family that he has been able to live vigorously for so long,” Dan Rutim’s son Gazraan Rutim stated in a clear voice while being illuminated by the bonfire. “May our clan head’s great strength continue to carry us into the future. Tonight, we grant our thanks to our mother forest that he has been able to pass another year in good health. Happy birthday to our clan head, Dan Rutim.”

“Happy birthday!” a chorus shouted in response as bottles of fruit wine were lifted into the air.

The man of the evening was right there beside his son grinning away, raising his own bottle as well.

“My thanks to our related clan members from the Ruu, Lea, Min, Maam, and Ririn for coming all this way to celebrate today! And to the Rutim and Ruu women, as well as our friend Asuta of the Fa clan, the Deen woman who assisted him, and the Ruu’s guest Lem Dom for preparing tonight’s meal! Everything they’ve made tonight looks delicious, so go ahead and dig in!”

Though it wasn’t on the scale of the one at the Ruu settlement, the Rutim had something of a plaza in between their houses. Naturally, they didn’t have the time needed to construct stoves there, so instead there were cloths laid out here and there to place the dishes on top of.

For the previous banquet, we had used suurub leaves in place of plates, but the Ruu had since prepared a large number of wooden plates to use for such occasions. Borrowing those, Sheera Ruu’s group served up the steak and the meat and vegetable stir-fry they had prepared, along with a big helping of baked poitan. Then Reina Ruu’s group carried out the teriyaki meat soup they had made in a branch house kitchen and hurriedly passed it around.

There were only about half as many people present as there were for the banquet at Gazraan and Ama Min Rutim’s wedding, but it was still every bit as lively. Only a few minutes had passed since the event kicked off, but there was already a tremendous amount of noise and enthusiasm filling the space.

“Dan Rutim, I’ve brought the first special dish of the night.”

Toor Deen and I carried a pan over to Dan Rutim, who was seated right in front of the brilliantly blazing ritual flame.

“Ooh, well done, Asuta!” Dan Rutim exclaimed with a joyous grin, surrounded all around by colorful flowers picked by the women. “Hmm, it sure smells spicy! Is this the same dish I tasted a few days ago at the Ruu settlement?”

“Yes. It’s called giba curry. The taste is a lot closer to being perfected now, so please, give it a try,” I said as I removed the lid, and the smell of heated curry instantly burst forth. Everyone nearby crowded in a bit, wondering just what sort of dish it was. “It has a powerful flavor, so the way you eat it is by scooping some up with a baked poitan.”

“I see, I see. It’s no surprise, but this smell sure is making me hungry!”

After I served up some giba curry onto a plate and handed it to him, Dan Rutim dunked a baked poitan right on in. Then, he showed no trepidation whatsoever as he took a hearty bite.

“Ooh! This really *has* changed a lot! It’s absolutely delicious, Asuta!”

“Thank you. So would you say it met your expectations at least somewhat?”

“It certainly has! It’s definitely a bit of an unusual flavor, but it’s also undoubtedly tasty! And this spiciness is making me drink down my fruit wine even quicker!” he replied with a hearty chuckle, and then he looked around at his relatives. “You should all give it a try too! It’s got a powerful smell, but it’s incredibly good!”

I handed out plate after plate as one of the Rutim women present portioned out the giba curry. And after taking note of the shock on everyone’s faces, I headed back into the kitchen.

“All right, let’s carry that one out too.”

“Right, understood.”

With Toor Deen’s help, I carried a pot that had been waiting on a stove outside. The young girl really was stronger than she looked, but I could see a bit of exhaustion on her face. She had helped with the preparations for work at the Fa house in the morning, worked the stalls during the day, and then in the evening she did prep work for this banquet. It really had been a more busy day for her than usual.

“Sorry about this. Once we carry this one out and the one other dish, you can go ahead and enjoy the banquet, Toor Deen.”

“Ah, no, I’m just here to help man the stove... Besides, I don’t know many people here, so I wouldn’t even know what to do if I left your side.”

Now that she mentioned it, everyone Toor Deen knew was busy helping set things out. And so, I shot the young girl a smile as we carefully slipped through the crowd.

“Well then, how about we enjoy things together after we finish working? I don’t know many people here either, outside of the main Rutim house, so I was

having some trouble trying to figure out what to do with myself too.”

“Right,” Toor Deen replied with a gentle smile.

Ai Fa had arrived around sunset, and she must have been enjoying herself somewhere alongside Lem Dom, who had finished up her work manning the stove. If we just met up with them, that would likely be just fine for Toor Deen.

At any rate, when we made it back to Dan Rutim, I found a pair of familiar young men also waiting there: Ludo Ruu and Rau Lea.

“Oh, so you two came? Hey there.”

“Hey, long time no see, Asuta! That spicy yellow dish was pretty tasty! And that one you’ve got there smells good too!” Rau Lea greeted.

I had just seen Ludo Ruu the other day, but with Rau Lea, it had definitely been a while. And yet he seemed just the same as always, a carefree smile on his slim, androgynous-yet-gallant face.

“I’m not certain if it will be to your tastes, as this is even more of a work in progress than the giba curry.”

The giba curry pot had already been emptied out, so I went ahead and placed this new one down in front of the Rutim clan head.

“Dan Rutim, this is the dish I mentioned to you before.”

“Ooh, the one that uses giba brains and eyeballs?! You sure did make an outlandish dish!” Dan Rutim said, his eyes shining brightly with curiosity. “So the eyes and brain are sunk down in there? I can’t really see through the red from the tarapa!”

“I’ll portion it out onto some plates, so please go ahead and dig in.”

The broth had a tarapa base. In addition to myamuu and pico leaves, I had also employed plenty of herbs from Sym, so there wasn’t any issue in terms of smell.

I had revised how I handled the crucial brains and eyeballs in the dish a bit too. Rather than just boiling them, I first roasted the surface over a flame while they were still in the skull before I added them to the pot. Brains and eyeballs both had extremely distinctive textures to them. And so, roasting the surface

helped with that at least a little, and then I just needed to heat them through by boiling them in the pot. That was the conclusion I had arrived at over the course of the past few days.

“Hmm, now where did they get to?”

I had used the skull with the organs still inside to make the stock, and when that was done I discarded the bone after removing the eyes and brain to return them to the soup. Once I found them in the tarapa sauce, I sliced off around a fourth of the brain and added it to a plate alongside a whole eyeball.

“Go right ahead. Though keep in mind these are considered something of a delicacy rather than being just plain tasty.”

“A delicacy, is it?! Well, I won’t go complaining before I’ve even taken a bite!” Dan Rutim said with a chuckle, and then with an unsurprising lack of hesitation he started off by taking a bite of the brains.

As he munched on his food with a “Hrmm...” Dan Rutim’s eyes opened wide. “It certainly is an unusual taste. But, well, I suppose it sort of reminds me of cooking using innards.”

Chiming in with, “Let us see too,” Rau Lea and Ludo Ruu both reached out. And they had a similar reaction.

“Ah, it’s not bad... In fact, the broth is seriously delicious!”

“Yeah, this is tasty. The brain has a weird stickiness to it though.”

What about the eyeballs? Since there were two giba, I was only able to prepare four of them, and in no time at all three of them ended up in the mouths of these guys who were absolutely brimming with curiosity.

“Hmm, it’s not really tasty enough to earn special praise... I guess I’d call it average?”

“That’s true. It’s not exactly any more delicious than ordinary meat.”

“It’s not bad, though! But more importantly, this broth is great!”

It seemed that was the best evaluation I could earn at the moment. But, well, I figured it was okay since they at least weren’t calling it bad.

Around then, Morun Rutim approached, holding a large wooden plate.

“Asuta, it’s finished grilling too. Dad, this is giba tongue.”

“Tongue? You can even eat the tongue?”

That was Rau Lea acting shocked, as Dan Rutim had already been informed in advance.

Today’s giba tongue used other seasonings in addition to the sheel juice that provided a base. It was a salty sauce that combined diced sautéed aria, salt, sugar, pico leaves, and fruit wine all together. And fortunately, this dish earned pure straightforward praise.

“This is delicious! It’s just like normal meat!”

“No, it’s even tastier than ordinary meat, isn’t it?”

“Hmm, it certainly is tasty! It’s got plenty of fat, and a fantastic chewiness too!”

It seemed the people of the forest’s edge unsurprisingly preferred more meaty cuts to brains and eyeballs. But, well, I didn’t have any objection to that fact. I wasn’t exactly used to handling brains and eyeballs, so I just had to keep on experimenting with them whenever I got the chance.

“Dan Rutim, please have some of this too,” Reina Ruu said as her group carried over some soup and steak.

As he sampled those dishes, Dan Rutim looked truly blissful. “All of these dishes are so good that I can’t find the words! Thank you so much, everyone!”

“It was an honor to be entrusted with the stove on such an important day,” I replied.

“Yes, this has been a splendid birthday! Still, these aren’t all the dishes you’ve prepared, are they?” Dan Rutim asked, looking my way as he ate.

I went ahead and shot him back a smile.

“Of course not. There’s still one final special dish left, so make sure you leave enough space for it.”

“My stomach’s still got a third or so left to fill! If you don’t mind, I’d love to try

that dish out as soon as possible!”

“Hold on for just a moment, then.”

With that, I headed back to the kitchen along with Toor Deen.

The experimental giba curry and the brain, eyeballs, and tongue dishes were all what I’d call appetizers. But this final special dish was something I had prepared specifically with Dan Rutim in mind. With Toor Deen’s help, I lifted up the pot that had been sitting atop a lit stove to stay warm. And as we exited the kitchen, we ran right into Ai Fa.

“Huh? Weren’t you with Lem Dom?”

“I left that fool behind somewhere. She was getting out of control after chugging down all that fruit wine.”

Had she fallen prey to excess clinginess again? Despite the fact that it was a banquet, Ai Fa looked seriously fed up.

“Did you get a proper chance to eat, Ai Fa? It doesn’t look like you went anywhere near these pots, though.”

“My mouth still stings too much for that curry or other dishes with herbs. You didn’t use anything spicy in that dish, did you?”

“I didn’t. The most that’s in here is a bit for scent.”

“In that case, give me some of that. After Dan Rutim, of course.”

And so, we ended up heading over to the Rutim clan head as a group of three.

The crowd really seemed to be enjoying the banquet. Oura and Tsvai were huddling close together as they had some of Reina Ruu’s soup. And everyone must have finished setting things out, as I also spied Morun Rutim chatting with some young women.

Gazraan and Ama Min Rutim were together. And that especially large figure standing in front of them must have been Ji Maam. He was also here at the banquet as a guest, and I couldn’t help but wonder what they were talking about. If nothing else, the husband and wife pair wore bright smiles as they talked with the big guy.

I couldn't help but be reminded of the festival of the hunt at the Ruu settlement. But there was probably no helping that since the festival and Gazraan and Ama Min Rutim's wedding were the only banquets I had participated in. Back on that night, Darmu Ruu's words had seriously shaken me. But today, I could feel calm and at ease as I enjoyed the banquet.

As I stole a glance over at Ai Fa next to me, we hurried on over to Dan Rutim.

"Ooh, I was getting tired of waiting, Asuta!"

There was someone new there next to the smiling Rutim clan head now. The man had just as robust of a build as Dan Rutim, and sat there with his legs crossed. It was the Ruu clan head, Donda Ruu.

I guess it made sense that for the Rutim head's birthday celebration, the head of their parent clan would make a personal appearance. And as always, it really was quite a sight, having the two of them side by side.

After giving a bow, I went ahead and sat the pot in front of Dan Rutim.

"Sorry for the wait. Here's your giba ribs."

"Perfect! Can't get the party started without these!" he replied with a wide grin as he stared into the pot.

"Today I rubbed a specially-made sauce over them, then grilled them over charcoal."

I tried thinking up all sorts of ideas for the ribs, but plain grilled meat felt best suited to Dan Rutim, so this is what I ended up with. The sauce was practically identical to what I employed for the giba meat poitan wraps, just with the addition of mamaria vinegar. After making free use of the variety of seasonings I had at hand, this was the end result. To prepare the meat itself, I rubbed in salt and pico leaves, as well as a number of herbs. While it was all quite simple, this dish also utilized the results of the experimentation I had been doing lately.

"Well then, time to dig in!" Dan Rutim proclaimed as he grabbed one of the ribs portioned out atop a wooden plate. When he bit down, he tore off around eighty percent of the meat and broke out into an even bigger grin. Meanwhile, everyone else held back and waited till he finished that bite.

The Rutim clan head took so long chewing that it seemed like he thought it was a shame that he'd eventually have to swallow, but when he did he loudly declared, "Delicious! Asuta, these ribs are the best I've ever had!"

"I'm glad to hear that you like them," I replied, feeling a great joy welling up inside of me.

"Right!" Dan Rutim nodded as he grabbed a fresh rib, then he glanced all around. "No need to hold back! Everyone, dig in! There's enough here that there are no worries about needing to scramble for them! Please, eat alongside me and share in this joy!"

We had prepared enough ribs that it seemed like they would come spilling out of the pot. But I figured if we didn't have that many at the ready, Dan Rutim wouldn't be able to feel completely comfortable sharing with everyone else.

Ludo Ruu and Rau Lea had obviously been eagerly waiting as they instantly reached out, and it wasn't long before people started gathering from all around. Ai Fa and Donda Ruu grabbed some ribs, and so did Toor Deen and I now that we had finished up our work.

These ribs had layers of fat and meat to them. Though a good bit of fat was removed when grilling them for a long period of time, they were still incredibly juicy. Thanks to the myamuu and herbs, they had a strong aroma, and they tasted salty-sweet. The tau oil, sugar, chitt seeds, mamaria vinegar, and finely chopped aria all came together to make an exquisite flavor. I really was satisfied with how they had turned out.

Still, I've got to keep on training my skills as hard as I can.

My intention was to continue working hard so that I wouldn't lose out to my young rival...and so I could keep on seeing smiles from those around me.

As I had that thought, Dan Rutim suddenly shot to his feet. And as he stood there supported by his grigee cane, he spoke loudly to no one in particular. "Today truly has been a wonderful day! And on this joyous occasion, I have something I wish to tell you all!"

The crowd, all enjoying the various dishes, cheered in response.

With a satisfied nod, Dan Rutim continued on. "Where's Gazraan? Come on

over to me, son!”

“Yes? What is it, clan head?” a large figure questioned while approaching in the dim light.

Facing that way, Dan Rutim let out a hearty chuckle. “I’ve got something important to discuss! And since the head of our parent clan Donda Ruu is here too, this is the perfect chance! My comrades in the Rutim! And our fellows from the Ruu, Lea, Min, Maam, Muufa, and Ririn! Listen to these words from Dan Rutim, head of the main Rutim house!” he loudly proclaimed as he raised up his container of fruit wine. “I declare here and now that I’ll be yielding my seat as clan head to my eldest son, Gazraan Rutim!”



The cheers came to a sudden stop.

With a calm look on his face, Gazraan Rutim took several more steps forward. “What is this all about, father? I believe it’s still much too soon for you to be giving up your position as clan head.”

“That’s not true at all! I was figuring I’d quit right here and now!” Dan Rutim said with a hearty grin as he stared straight at his son. “Thanks to this leg injury, I’ve had to take more than a month off from hunting. Because of that, I was able to see just how much strength you had gained! And I’m convinced you can lead our people better than I can, Gazraan!”

“No, but...”

“It should take less than another month for my leg to heal back up. When that time comes, I’ll devote my strength to serving as a single hunter under the Rutim! My own father Raa yielded his position as clan head to me before he lost his strength as a hunter! But I suppose a young fellow like you wouldn’t yet understand the joy that I feel as both a clan head and a father to be able to do the same, Gazraan!” At that, Dan Rutim took a swig from his fruit wine, and then he thrust the bottle out toward his son. “Once my leg is healed, if we were to have a contest of strength as hunters, I still can’t imagine I would be the one to hit the ground! But what qualifies someone as a clan head isn’t the same as what makes someone a great hunter! And you’re already better suited to being clan head than I am!”

His son didn’t say a word.

“Take this wine with my blessing! Tonight, the Rutim clan head Dan Rutim yields his position to his eldest son, Gazraan Rutim!”

The young man silently closed his eyes. It felt so quiet that I could almost hear my heart pounding...and when Gazraan Rutim opened his eyes again, there was a stronger light blazing in them than ever before. His gaze was very calm and gentle, yet also filled with an awe-inspiring resolve, and somehow it reminded me of the piercing hawk-like glare of Raa Rutim.

“I humbly accept,” Gazraan Rutim declared, taking a sip of the fruit wine.

Seeming satisfied at the sight, Dan Rutim then looked down toward the

ground. “Donda Ruu! As the head of our parent clan, do we have your blessing?”

“Hmph... You’re younger than I am, so I never figured you’d be stepping down as clan head first,” Donda Ruu grumbled as he slowly rose to his feet.

Despite the sour look on his leader’s face, Dan Rutim still responded with a hearty chuckle. “Aw, don’t go trying to act like my elder when there’s only a two-year difference between us! And actually, between today and your next birthday, it’s only a difference of one year.”

“Hmph!” Donda Ruu grumbled, accepting the fruit wine container. “I give my blessing to the new Rutim clan head, Gazraan Rutim,” he proclaimed, taking a sip.

At that, five hunters stepped up beside him. One of them was Rau Lea, and another was Ji Maam. They must have belonged to each of the clans under the Ruu. And every one of them then gave their blessing and took a sip of fruit wine.

“I became the Lea clan head at the age of sixteen. You’re already twenty and some years old, so you shouldn’t have any problems at all. I give my blessing to the new Rutim clan head, Gazraan Rutim!” Rau Lea declared as the final one in the group, and then a cheer erupted.

It seemed the Rutim clan members had finally gotten over their shock. And as those cheers filled the air, Ai Fa stepped forward in front of the eldest Rutim son.

“Gazraan Rutim, I have no blood ties to your clan, but even so, allow me to offer my blessing.”

“Thank you, Ai Fa. I hope that you and Asuta will both continue to be good friends to the Rutim.”

“Of course,” Ai Fa replied with a firm nod.

At that point, I hurried up next to her. After showing me an even gentler smile than usual, Gazraan Rutim turned to face his clan members.

“My fellow members of the Rutim! I swear here and now that I shall use all

my strength to guide you and not bring shame to the post of clan head that my father Dan has yielded to me! Please, help me to lead our people down the proper path!”

The crowd now roared, giving their blessings to their new clan head.

As I felt their tremendous passion wash over me, I turned toward the now former Rutim clan head.

“Dan Rutim, I don’t really know what’s appropriate to say at a time like this, but...well, thanks for everything you’ve done.”

“Sure! I’m really glad I was able to have you two friends of the Rutim present for the announcement!” Dan Rutim replied, his face brimming with pure joy. And then, his big expressive eyes started to tear up a bit.

Despite the tight feeling in my chest, I still somehow managed to smile at him. “I’m sure someone as young as me could never imagine how you’re feeling, but you must be happy, right?”

“Of course! I must be the happiest man in the whole forest’s edge right now,” Dan Rutim said, then he lifted his arms up overhead. “Well then, let’s keep this party going! There’s still food left to be had, so everyone enjoy yourselves and keep on chowing down till there’s not so much as a single morsel left!”

A stirring cheer filled the air in response. As I listened to those voices, I could feel a deep exhaustion washing over my head.

Li Sudra is pregnant, and Dan Rutim yielded the position of clan head to Gazraan Rutim... The days really do keep on turning...

I thought to myself how today was a day that would never come again. Now matter how hard or joyful a day may be, it would eventually end and become a part of the past. I had lost that precious time in my home country, but I had gained this new home after that, and had overcome great challenges with my new comrades to arrive at a day like today. There was little doubt that more hardship and joy was still to come. But I keenly hoped that I would overcome those tough times with the people precious to me, and share the good times with them too.

“What are you making such a gloomy face for?! That’s no sort of look to be

wearing on such a joyous day, Asuta!” Dan Rutim said with a grin and a slap on my back.

Gazraan Rutim smiled too.

Just what sort of expression had I been making? Maybe it was a sort of mix of joy and sorrow, like when you’re smiling through your tears.

As I wondered about that, Ai Fa came in close without making a sound. Her blue eyes just calmly stared straight at me.

“Your work manning the stove is finished, isn’t it? So you should come and enjoy the rest of the banquet with our friends in the Rutim clan.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

Impulsively, I reached out and grabbed Ai Fa’s hand.

Though she responded with a bit of a suspicious look, she didn’t shake me off. Instead, she led me over to the pot and silently shoved a rib into my mouth.

When I took a bite, I murmured, “Delicious.”

At that, Ai Fa finally broke out in a smile, with a gleam in her eyes that reminded me of a small child.

The twenty-sixth of the black month had been an utterly unforgettable day for me, and it was now finally coming to a close.

Group Performance

Chapter 1: Melancholy of the Second Ruu Son

1

It was the thirty-first day of the blue month.

On this, the month's final day, Asuta of the Fa clan said his farewells to the Silver Vase, led by the easterner Shumiral, and the southerner Balan's construction group in the post town. On top of that, Shin Ruu was injured in an attack by Jeeda, who saw the people of the forest's edge as his enemies. And Shumiral asked Vina Ruu to marry him, requesting that she give him her answer in half a year.

A great deal had happened on the thirty-first of the blue month...but Darmu Ruu of the main Ruu house was in the northern settlement at the time, with no clue what was occurring to his relatives Shin and Vina Ruu.

At the time, things in that part of the forest were just as hectic as they had been for the Fa and Ruu clans. The northern clans were hit hard by the fact that their former parent clan the Suun were now seen as criminals, and they were also tasked with keeping watch over the guilty members of the main Suun house.

Out of that group, the previous clan head Zattsu Suun and his retainer had already had their souls returned to the forest. That just left three to deal with: the head of the main house, Zuuro Suun, his eldest son Diga, and his second son Doddo. Darmu Ruu had come all this way from the Ruu settlement in order to help watch over those three criminals.

Still...these men sure are pathetic, Darmu Ruu thought to himself as Diga groveled at his feet.

They were currently at the settlement of one of the three northern clans, the

Dom. Since Zattsu Suun had previously burnt down a number of Dom houses, during the day Diga and Doddo were tasked with helping to rebuild them.

Since he was charged with keeping an eye on them, Darmu Ruu was also working on the same task. Currently, he and Diga were carrying back logs that had been cut down at the outskirts of the forest, but the former Suun heir ran out of strength and collapsed before they made it to their destination.

“Don’t go grumbling about carrying so little weight. And you call yourself a man of the forest’s edge?” Darmu Ruu scolded, but Diga could only keep on cowering and breathing heavily. They had just gotten started, but it seemed that he really was exhausted. But before Darmu Ruu could continue, a low voice called out from behind.

“Second Ruu son, that man won’t move even if you kick him once he’s like that. You should rest up too until he can move again,” the young Dom man wearing a giba skull stated, while carrying another load of lumber along with Doddo, who had once been Diga’s younger brother. The former second son of the Suun’s square face was coated in sweat, and he looked like he was ready to collapse at any moment. “Jeez, they’re such wretches that it’s hard to believe they used to be the leading clan. We held animosity toward you Ruu for a long time for how you stood against our parent clan...but I really have to admit that you were in the right.”

With those parting words, the Dom man left along with Doddo.

As he held back a sigh, Darmu Ruu looked down at Diga, who still showed no signs of rising to his feet. Diga’s feet were tied together with a short leather strap so that he couldn’t run. His face was coated in stubble, and even though he used to be bigger than Darmu Ruu, he had seriously withered away. There was no life in his eyes. And he had been stripped of his hunter’s cloak and necklace of horns and tusks, with his remaining clothing looking quite filthy. It all added up to such a shabby appearance that it seemed hard to believe the man was even a person of the forest’s edge, much less once part of the leading clan.

“You’ve ended up so pathetic because you’re not even properly eating your meals...” Darmu Ruu said as he sat down atop a log lying on the ground. “If you

don't have any strength, then eat some jerky. I have your portion here."

Diga just listlessly shook his head in response. The sight of that was enough to once again ignite Darmu Ruu's anger.

"This job was assigned to you due to your crimes. Don't you have any intention of atoning?"

Darmu Ruu had only raised his voice a bit, but that was enough for Diga to wail, "Aah!" and cradle his head in his hands.

Finding the whole thing ridiculous, the second Ruu son went ahead and bit into some jerky himself. It was giba jerky that had been given to him by the Dom clan, and the powerful stench about it annoyed him even further.

This jerky is seriously terrible.

Even though he had only taken a single bite, the terrible smell of it had permeated his nose. Whether it was the animalistic stink or the stench of blood, it was an unpleasant odor that the lilo herbs used to smoke the jerky just couldn't cover up. But less than two months ago, Darmu Ruu had eaten jerky just like it each and every day without ever questioning it.

Ugh, he's so annoying... Darmu Ruu thought to himself as a certain pale chef came to mind. Thanks to him, the second Ruu son had ended up the sort of man to get annoyed by bad-tasting jerky.

No, it wasn't just the jerky that was an issue. Dinners were even worse. The crudely cut giba meat was either boiled together with poitan or grilled up in a heated pot. The night he arrived at the settlement three days ago, he was left truly astounded at the fact that giba meat that hadn't been bloodlet was *this* disgusting.

Still, I'm sure that Reina made food at least a bit better than that even with unbloodlet meat.

Perhaps it was the level of flame she used, the vegetables she chose, or how she cut the meat... At any rate, he didn't think her meals were anywhere near this awful. But even so, it wasn't like there was anything he could do about it.

Apparently, that discussion with the nobles yesterday didn't settle things

either. When Gulaf Zaza made it back, he seemed like he was in an even worse mood than when he had left. And so, it seemed like they would need to keep on watching and guarding the criminals from the Suun clan for the time being.

Darmu Ruu had decided to head to the northern settlement of his own volition. Since they couldn't spare the men for guard duty forever, Gulaf Zaza had asked for assistance from the Ruu while they were in their break period, and Darmu Ruu had volunteered himself.

The Lea and Rutim men who had come along with him were in the Zaza settlement, keeping an eye on Zuuro Suun. Even just the thought of having to spend a whole day in a house like that felt tedious, so Darmu Ruu had taken up the task of watching Diga and Doddo in the Dom settlement instead.

The Dom men had left that one man who had spoken to Darmu Ruu earlier behind and then headed out to hunt. And so, the two of them kept watch over Diga and Doddo while repairing the burnt houses...but by the third day, the second Ruu son's patience was running out.

Was it a complete waste coming all the way out here? he thought to himself while glaring down at the limply seated Diga's back. Darmu Ruu had left his family and come so far secretly thinking that maybe seeing these pathetic men would help him come to understand his own weaknesses.



Just when did I stray from the proper path? Darmu Ruu pondered to himself.

Up until just recently, he hadn't felt that anything was lacking in his life. He lived surrounded by his family while wanting for nothing and feeling proud to be a man of the forest's edge. The only real concern he had at the time was the fact that the shameless Suun were acting as the leading clan.

But he had felt that if the Ruu and the clans under them accumulated further strength, they could take down the Suun in the not-so-distant future. The previous Ruu clan head had his soul return to the forest filled with anger and regret, but the current clan head, Darmu Ruu's father Donda Ruu, would bring order back to the forest's edge.

Darmu Ruu respected his father more than anyone. Donda Ruu was the

bravest hunter of all the forest's edge, and only the Ruu had the strength needed to take down the Suun. Darmu Ruu had spent his life up till now filled with pride for being that man's son and for having been born into the Ruu clan.

The first incident to cause that to start to crumble occurred when he met Ai Fa two years ago. His youngest sister Rimee Ruu and the elder Jiba Ruu had formed a bond with the last of the Fa, who had lost her family and then gotten into some sort of quarrel with the Suun heir. When he heard about that, Donda Ruu proposed to have Ai Fa marry Darmu Ruu, but she turned the offer down. Still, he hadn't been all that shaken back then. He had just thought that she was a truly foolish woman.

Darmu Ruu had visited Fa house along with his father and brothers. That Ai Fa girl turned out to be rather beautiful, but she wore a hunter's cloak and blade despite being a woman, and intended to make a living hunting giba... It was absolutely ludicrous.

He had heard that she had only just turned fifteen. It was true that there was an incredibly intense light shining in her eyes, for a woman, but those slender arms could never swing a sword. She would just be throwing her life away, which made her a fool despite her beauty. And so he couldn't help but feel he would have turned her down anyway.

But then, two years passed, until that day two months ago. Darmu Ruu saw Ai Fa once again at the Ruu settlement, when his youngest sister Rimee Ruu had insisted on having the Fa clan man the stove for Jiba Ruu's sake. Ai Fa had invited some foreign man into her clan, and Rimee Ruu enthusiastically described to her family how the delicious food that he made was like magic.

When Darmu Ruu heard that, he thought it was all ridiculous. There was no way something like that would give Jiba Ruu back the strength to live on. It would be sad when Jiba Ruu died, but she had lived longer than anyone else at the forest's edge and already carried out her work. Darmu Ruu probably wouldn't be able to hold back his tears on the day that her soul returned to the forest, but no matter how sad it might be, it was the way of the world that no one's life lasted forever. That was just how things went, in accordance with the will of the forest. And Darmu Ruu figured struggling pointlessly against that would just bring needless pain and suffering.

However, Donda Ruu accepted Rimee Ruu's request. And so, Ai Fa visited the Ruu settlement along with her suspicious new clan member.

In the two years since Darmu had last seen her, Ai Fa had grown even more beautiful. And in addition to gaining a fist's worth of height or so, her slender body was now brimming with the strength of a hunter.

Looking at her then, he could see how she was able to act as a full-fledged hunter. And in fact, there were a ton of horns and tusks hanging around her neck. That, more than anything, was proof that she was just as successful as the hunters of the Ruu.

However, that fact threw Darmu Ruu out of sorts. It was true that she might have gained the strength needed to be a hunter. But without any clan members or the like to assist her, she had to hunt all on her own. It was hard to see that as anything but her needlessly putting her life at risk.

As a woman, Ai Fa should give birth to plenty of children, and if they could be raised into fine hunters, then in the end it would amount to even more strength that could be dedicated to hunting giba. And yet, she instead brought some man from another country, who couldn't even hunt, into her house and was acting like a clan head, which really got on Darmu Ruu's nerves.

On that night when he saw her again, Darmu Ruu had ended up disparaging Ai Fa. Allowing the fruit wine to drunkenly drive his emotions, he had uttered every vile thing that came to mind. And on top of that, he had once again asked her to marry him.

But despite the cold look she had shot him, Ai Fa didn't respond to Darmu Ruu. And of all things, that pale clan member of hers had snapped back at him. Even when he was right in the middle of the Ruu settlement with no blade on his person, he hadn't seem scared of Darmu Ruu in the least.

"Right now, I'm in charge of manning Ai Fa's stove. But until just five days ago, she handled that too! She hunted giba and manned the stove all by herself! And she did a perfect job of taking care of the work of both a man and a woman. Can you do that?!" that pale chef, Asuta of the Fa clan, had shouted. That foreigner looked even weaker than a woman of the forest's edge, but he had the blazing eyes of a hunter as he said that.

Darmu Ruu had counterattacked, asking him if he intended to pick a fight with the Ruu clan while half wanting to slice this boy from his mouth to his ear if he didn't hold his tongue.

But rather than seeming scared, Asuta of the Fa clan had instead looked a touch fed up as he continued: "Hey, I don't have any issue with the people of the forest's edge or the Ruu clan. I'm just talking to *you*, Darmu Ruu. I'm telling you to stop being so rude to my benefactor, Ai Fa."

Those words felt strangely piercing. Darmu Ruu didn't know just why he had felt so shaken. But despite the angry glare he'd aimed at the chef, he couldn't find any words to shoot back, nor could he bring himself to draw his blade.

After that, Asuta of the Fa clan had manned the stove for the Rutim wedding banquet, started doing business in the post town, and even exposed the crimes of the Suun.

But what had Darmu Ruu done in the meantime?

Nothing at all.

He just kept on carrying out his work as a hunter.

Of course, since he was a hunter, there wasn't anything wrong with that. He had been terribly injured protecting the branch family member Shin Ruu, but after a bit of time off, he was back to working just as hard as before. There was no reason to be ashamed of the life he was living, either as a hunter or as a person of the forest's edge.

However...he just couldn't get those words from Asuta of the Fa clan out of his head.

"I'm just talking to *you*, Darmu Ruu."

What did he mean by "just you"? It was true that he was ultimately the singular man known as Darmu Ruu, but he was also a person of the forest's edge and the second son of the Ruu. You couldn't separate those facts from who he was as a person, and it was meaningless to even consider.

And yet, he felt strangely flustered when he looked at the members of the Fa clan. Ai Fa was carrying out her work as a hunter despite being a woman, and

Asuta worked the stove even though he was a man. Neither of those actions were taboo at the forest's edge, but they also undoubtedly turned their backs on customs formed over the course of many years.

Women were supposed to give birth to children, while men should use all their strength to hunt giba. Otherwise, there would be no order and stability at the forest's edge. If all the women chose to live as hunters and abandoned their duty to give birth, their people would die out. And there was no way that such a thing could ever be acceptable.

Yet at present, the members of the Fa clan were bringing about a great change at the forest's edge. Saying he wanted to bring prosperity to the forest's edge, Asuta of the Fa clan had begun selling giba cooking in the post town, and that had been steadily bearing fruit. On top of that, the Suun clan had fallen thanks to Asuta's advice. And the members of the Fa clan had formed ties with a man named Kamyua Yoshu, who was trying to expose the past crimes of Zattsu Suun and the nobles.

Darmu Ruu's older brother Jiza Ruu seemed greatly perplexed by all this, as he so heavily valued law and order.

Still, Donda Ruu seemed to acknowledge the strength of the Fa clan, and they really did seem to be trying to lead the people of the forest's edge down the proper path forward.

Despite all that, Darmu Ruu still wished that Ai Fa would simply live as a woman. That was why he had issued a challenge to her during the contest of strength held at the festival of the hunt. He had thrust the condition on her that if she lost, she would join the Ruu clan.

If she at least fell under the Ruu, there wouldn't be much of a risk of her dying out in the forest. And if she could learn to find meaning and purpose in living as a woman after being surrounded by so many other people... That was the one sliver of hope he had grasped at with his challenge.

And yet, Darmu Ruu had lost to Ai Fa. At some point, she had grown into an even stronger hunter than he was. No matter how much he struggled at that point, he could never do anything to move her and change her mind.

Then Darmu Ruu came to the northern settlement. He wanted to know just

how it was that he had ended up so weak.

Looks like it was all for naught, though, Darmu Ruu thought to himself as he continued looking down at Diga, whose back was now bent like an old man's. The two Suun men had ended up being far more dimwitted and pathetic than he had expected.

He had thought maybe he could clear up some of his own doubts by learning more about Diga and Doddo, who were born into the leading clan but didn't possess any strength of their own...but he simply couldn't see anything of himself in such truly pathetic men.

"My, you look bored, Darmu Ruu," a voice chuckled from beside him. When he turned to look, he found a Dom woman carrying a large load of lumber and staring back at him. She was the younger sister of the Dom clan head.

"Diga there gets exhausted even quicker than a young child. It's no surprise you'd have excess energy to burn, having to keep pace with a man like that, is it?"

"Yeah." Darmu Ruu nodded back, thinking about how that was exactly the case. Then that woman (he believed her name was Lem Dom) stared at Diga with an overwhelming look of contempt.

"You really are pathetic. I'm shocked someone born to be a hunter of the forest's edge could end up such an unsightly mess. If I were you, I would surely have taken my own life from pure shame."

Even as the woman disparaged him, Diga didn't so much as lift his head. And with a hearty shrug of her shoulders, Lem Dom walked off with a powerful gait.

How are they able to live on when they're so lacking in pride?

As he bit down on the jerky with its awful stench, Darmu Ruu gave a deep sigh to vent his anger.

2

Two days had passed.

On the night of Darmu Ruu's fifth day in the north, there were intruders at the

Zaza settlement, where Zuuro Suun was being held. It happened late at night, when everyone was asleep. Darmu Ruu had been off duty and resting when he was awoken by the Lea man's shouting.

"Intruders! Men from town in the settlement!"

The piercing sound of a grass whistle continued to shriek into the air, and the doors of the houses all around swung open as hunters came leaping out.

After sharing a look with the Rutim man next to him, Darmu Ruu opened the door to his rear.

There were several figures cowering in the darkness, which then suddenly got up, looking startled. As he tried to sense anyone else nearby, Darmu Ruu lit up a candlestick with a lana leaf.

Zuuro Suun, Diga, and Doddoo... Their limbs were still bound, and the window still looked to be properly boarded. Darmu Ruu and the other man were tasked with guarding over and watching these three, never leaving their side no matter what.

"Wh-What's going on...?" Diga questioned in a trembling voice.

"Someone snuck into the settlement," Darmu Ruu tersely replied.

In the next moment, Zuuro Suun broke out in a strange wail, "It's the nobles of Genos... They're trying to take me away!"

"Hey, Zuuro Suun..."

"I can't stand it! I only ever followed my father's teachings! If that's a crime, then go ahead and take my scalp! Return my soul to the forest!" he wailed like a madman, slamming his head against the wall. During the day he was like a living corpse, which made this current frenzy hard to believe.

"Stop that! Your crimes still need to be judged!" the Rutim hunter warned, hurriedly pinning Zuuro Suun. "Lend me a hand, Darmu Ruu. We'll tie him down to a pillar."

"Right."

Originally, Zuuro Suun had been every bit as large as Donda Ruu. And no matter how much he had withered away, that meant it still took a great deal of

effort to suppress his mad flailing. Even after the two of them tied him to the large pillar and shoved a balled-up cloth into his mouth so he couldn't bite his tongue, Zuuro Suun continued to struggle for a while longer, like a giba that had been caught in a trap.

"I can't stand it either... Why do we have to be treated like this?" Diga whined as he started sobbing. The sight of that once again caused Darmu Ruu's anger to flare up.

"What are you whining about now? You shouldn't even have to ask, considering the countless crimes you all committed."

"But...but we were just following the rules set down by the Suun clan..." Diga talked back, his expression and tone like that of a young child.

Darmu Ruu found it hard to believe this man was the same age as he, much less formerly the heir to the leading clan of the forest's edge, and that only stirred up his anger further. Diga was the person Darmu Ruu could stand least of all. He just couldn't accept a man who would sob so pathetically all the time, even more than either Zuuro Suun, who usually just stared vacantly with the eyes of a corpse, or Doddo, who was always silently wearing a gloomy expression.

"You are being treated as criminals precisely because those rules set by the Suun were wrong. Just the fact that you deceived your fellow people of the forest's edge to pillage the bounty of Morga while neglecting your duties as hunters would normally be enough to earn you a death sentence."

"But Zattsu Suun is the one who set those rules... We only followed them..."

"I'm telling you..." Darmu Ruu started to retort, but then the words caught in his throat.

Something was tugging at him.

Darmu Ruu crouched down and stared at Diga's sobbing face. Though Diga hurriedly averted his eyes, he failed to escape Darmu Ruu's gaze.

"Former eldest son of the Suun... Did you really not have any doubts about how you were living? You didn't see any fault with the fact that you were committing more crimes than could be counted while keeping the truth from

the clans under you, such as the Zaza and Dom?”

“L-Like I said, those were the rules...”

“Those were mistaken rules set by Zattsu Suun. Even you people must have been able to realize how greatly they strayed from the laws of the forest’s edge, right?”

“B-But... Our family in the main house and all our relatives in the branch houses followed those rules... When all the people closest to me followed them, do you really think I could betray them? A-And if anyone found out we were breaking the taboos of the forest’s edge, everyone would be scalped... We had no choice but to follow the rules laid down by Zattsu Suun...”

The more he listened, the more foolish it all seemed. But even so, the strange sensation billowing up in Darmu Ruu’s chest only grew stronger.

They’re dimwitted, frail, despicable men. The members of the branch houses had followed Zattsu Suun’s rules despite having lost the will to live in order to protect themselves and their families...but these fools were lazing around, feeling untouchable in their position above them, making light of other clans for taking their work hunting giba seriously. My father definitely wasn’t wrong when he determined the members of the main house needed to be punished by having their clan name stripped away.

But...to the members of the Suun clan, those rules had been absolute.

To the people of the forest’s edge, their laws were absolute, but the same was true for the Suun clan and their own rules. If you ignored the question of what was right and wrong, then that would probably hold true.

If...

If Darmu Ruu had been born into the Suun clan, how would he have turned out?

Had he found himself in Diga’s position, what would have become of him?

Up until a mere ten years ago, Zattsu Suun had held absolute power as the leading clan head. If he had been Zattsu Suun’s grandson, and son to that coward Zuuro Suun, raised surrounded by relatives with eyes like corpses,

would he have ended up the sort of man he was now? Would he have been a proud enough man to stand up against Zattsu Suun, who insisted his path was the right one? He thought of Donda Ruu's teachings as absolute and never doubted them, so could he have found fault with what Zattsu Suun said?

Darmu Ruu couldn't say.

And also...

What would the case be for Ai Fa and Asuta of the Fa clan?

If Ai Fa had been born into the Suun clan, what sort of person would she have ended up as? And if Asuta had been picked up by the Suun instead, what sort of path would he have followed? Darmu Ruu was fixated on the thought.

Those two had stood in direct opposition to the customs of the forest's edge. Becoming a hunter despite being a woman, inviting a foreigner into your clan, doing business in the post town... None of that was taboo at the forest's edge, but it certainly went against the way things were done. That was exactly why clans like the Zaza, Dom, Jeen, and Beim opposed the Fa clan's actions.

But in spite of that, the members of the Fa clan didn't bend. They wished to live properly as people of the forest's edge while also opposing customs, and even said they wished to bring prosperity to their people... That was the complex path they had chosen for themselves.

If it were those two...could they decide they were right instead of Zattsu Suun and push forward down the path they believed in?

Without her parents from the Fa clan, Ai Fa might not have ended up as such a proud woman.

However, it was true that she had the strength needed to live on her own. At the very least, she was strong enough not to fear living a solitary life. Plus, she was proud enough to value her own feelings over the customs of the forest's edge. So she might well have possessed the guts needed to oppose such a wicked grandfather and foolish father.

And then there was Asuta.

What would have become of that pale chef if he joined the Suun clan instead?

It was possible he could have been killed for running his mouth the very night that he was picked up. No matter how strong of a will he might have possessed, he wasn't strong enough in body to swing a sword.

Still, if nothing else, he surely wouldn't want to earn coins for the wicked Suun clan. It was even possible he could have found allies—that mysterious eldest daughter, the youngest son, or even Tei Suun—to bring them down from the inside. At least, that was how it seemed to Darmu Ruu.

Is that the difference between me and them? Darmu Ruu vaguely thought to himself under the light from the candle.

Then he noticed that Diga was trembling as he turned his face away. He must have been scared by Darmu Ruu glaring at him all this time. And seeing that, the rage in his chest started flaring up in a different direction.

If he were born into the Ruu he might have ended up as someone like me, and if I were born into the Suun, it could be me making for such a pathetic sight right now.

Darmu Ruu closed his eyes, holding back the deep sigh he felt coming.

He was weak.

All of his strength came from someone else.

Of course, there was nothing wrong with the power he possessed. He intended to keep on using it for the sake of his family, the Ruu clan, and the whole of the forest's edge.

But that was surely the strength of the Ruu. If his clan fell, it would be lost as well.

Even after losing all of her family, Ai Fa remained strong. So she had surely made the power she gained as a member of the Fa and a person of the forest's edge her own strength.

And Asuta had lost not only his family but even his very country, and yet he was showing his strength here in this land that was foreign to him. He had a power in him that Darmu Ruu didn't possess. That was precisely the difference between them. It was why Asuta was so strong...and why Darmu Ruu was so

weak.

But still, that's no reason to fall to despair!

Darmu Ruu slammed his fist full force into the fur rug on the floor.

"Eek!" Diga pathetically shrieked in response.

And so the night dragged on, unbearably slow.

3

It was ten whole days after that when Darmu Ruu returned to the Ruu settlement. In the end, he spent over half a month up north.

Tomorrow, the third meeting with the nobles would be held in the castle town. Darmu Ruu was set to accompany the leading clan heads as one of their guards.

That was just fine by him. If those nobles tried to pull anything underhanded, he'd repay them with his blade. Darmu Ruu felt no hesitation whatsoever.

Still, that damn Asuta of the Fa clan... I can't believe he's so careless, getting kidnapped by some noble girl after he went and ran his mouth like that, Darmu Ruu thought to himself during the banquet being held in the Ruu plaza.

There were several large cloths spread out in various places, and a great number of people who weren't members of the Ruu clan were around too. There were the leading clans of the Zaza and Sauti, the Rutim and Lea who fell under the Ruu, the criminals of the main Suun house, the Fou and Beim who were tasked with keeping watch over the decisions made by the leading clan heads...and Ai Fa and Asuta of the Fa clan too.

It had been five days since Asuta was rescued from the nobles. After returning from the northern settlement, Darmu Ruu had heard both of how he had been kidnapped and how Ai Fa had gotten him back.

And ever since, he had been awash in profound anger. Even after he threw all that rage directly at Asuta, his mood still hadn't cleared up.

But Asuta knew nothing of Darmu Ruu's anger, and was just doing his job

handing out food. As that was going on, the second Ruu son took a sip of fruit wine, only for someone to suddenly speak up from beside him.

“Umm...do you mind if I sit next to you?”

When he turned to look, he found Sheera Ruu timidly standing there where his younger brother Ludo Ruu was supposed to be sitting. Sheera Ruu was the eldest daughter of one of the branch houses. Her father was the younger brother of Darmu Ruu’s dad, Donda Ruu. And as the second Ruu son gave a silent tilt of his head, Sheera Ruu broke out in a faint smile.

“You see, Ludo Ruu took my spot...”

Looking around, Darmu Ruu found Ludo and Lala Ruu on either side of Sheera Ruu’s younger brother Shin Ruu, getting all worked up like kids. Things were really just as lively as most banquets.

“He really is flippant. If he’s in the way, then just tell him so. You shouldn’t put up with that behavior from a thoughtless guy like him.”

“You think?” Sheera Ruu replied, wringing her hands as her expression grew all the more delicate and frail.

When he saw that, Darmu Ruu finally came to a realization. “Hey, is the issue that you have trouble complaining about someone from the main house, even if it’s that insensitive jerk? If so, I’ll go drag him away for you.”

“No, that’s not it...” Sheera Ruu answered, breaking out in an expression that looked both joyful and sad at the same time.

At that, Darmu Ruu tilted his head again, wondering just what it was she wanted in that case, only for his grandmother Tito Min Ruu to call out from another seat over.

“How long do you intend to keep on standing there, Sheera Ruu? Just go ahead and sit wherever. Everyone’s moving around as they please, so there’s no need to worry yourself.”

Just as Tito Min Ruu said, folks like Dan Rutim and Rau Lea had positioned themselves where it would be easy to grab the dishes they had their eyes on. And Asuta, Ai Fa, and Jiba Ruu had moved over toward Zuuro Suun’s group, so

the original seating arrangement had become completely lost by this point.

Even so, Sheera Ruu shot Darmu Ruu a sad smile and asked, “Do you mind if I sit here?”

“If that’s what you want, then just go ahead and do it.”

With that, Sheera Ruu finally kneeled down and let out a wistful sigh.

Darmu Ruu then took a sip of fruit wine, thinking about how he really just didn’t get this woman.

“Umm...how was the northern settlement?”

“The food was gross,” he replied as he bit into some giba meat wrapped in a strange coating. It really was irritatingly delicious.

“I see...” Sheera Ruu replied with a weak smile, and then a silence hung in the air.

It was then that Darmu Ruu had a sudden realization: Sheera Ruu was the only one in the whole world who knew how endlessly troubled he had been. On the night of the festival of the hunt, when he lost to Ai Fa in a contest of strength and threw all his raw emotions at Ai Fa...back when he had felt more shaken than ever before, he had talked to Sheera Ruu and gave her a glimpse of the feelings he hadn’t even opened up to his family about.

I’m weak...far too weak!

This weakness may be the same thing that led the Suun to ruin, from being part of a large clan...

Darmu Ruu had whined those feeble complaints, with his back facing the banquet fire.

That’s not true at all! Sheera Ruu had denied as she clung to his back. For some reason, her voice had sounded tearful. He hadn’t had another chance to properly talk with her since that night.

Sheera Ruu must have approached him wondering whether or not he found the answer he was seeking at the northern settlement. When he realized that, Darmu Ruu felt something he couldn’t describe, so he drank more fruit wine in order to drown it out.

“It was a little different than I expected, but I think I found an answer of sorts,” he stated, and Sheera Ruu’s eyes opened wide in shock.

Had that been too abrupt? Darmu Ruu wasn’t exactly skilled with his words in the first place. And that went even more so when he was talking to a young woman.

But as her expression brightened up a bit, Sheera Ruu said, “I see. If it’s made your heart feel even a little lighter, then that’s wonderful news. I really am glad...”

“Even if I know why, it doesn’t change the fact that I’m still weak.”

“No, I believe whether you know something like that or not makes a world of difference. I just know that you’ll be all right, Darmu Ruu.”

“Hey, even if I say I know, it could just be guesswork on my part,” Darmu Ruu bluntly shot back, only for Sheera Ruu to give an almost motherly smile.

“That absolutely isn’t true. Please, believe in your own strength, Darmu Ruu.”

Despite the fact that Sheera Ruu was a year younger than him, she would sometimes look so mature. Did that strength come from the fact that she was an oldest child who helped raise three younger brothers? Somehow, Darmu Ruu felt a bit frustrated as he roughly bit into a baked poitan.

It was around then that things got noisy from the seats further down.

Looking that way, Darmu Ruu saw that the tiny former youngest daughter of the main Suun house was shouting at the people around her. Then, that girl suddenly turned around and ran off into the darkness. Asuta took off after her in a hurry, and Ai Fa soon followed. And that whole spectacle only served to irritate Darmu Ruu further.

“That damn fool. Has he learned nothing from what happened?”

Asuta moved without thinking, and then Ai Fa had to clean up his messes. They just kept on repeating the same old pattern.

Darmu Ruu started to rise, figuring he would follow and chew that thoughtless fool out, but Gulaf Zaza and Mida had already stood up and went after them, so he went ahead and reluctantly sat back down.

At that, Sheera Ruu shot him a gentle smile.

“You have trouble letting people weaker than you go out on their own, don’t you, Darmu Ruu? I really am eternally grateful for the time that you saved Shin Ruu.”

“Stop bringing up old stuff like that already,” Darmu Ruu said dismissively with another swig of fruit wine. Whether it was because of the alcohol or how irritated he was, the scar on his right cheek was throbbing and felt hot. The wound was one that he had received saving Shin Ruu. “And besides, it’s not like I’m concerned for Asuta of the Fa clan or anything. I just find it annoying how he acts so rashly and causes trouble for the folks around him.”

“I see... But the incident the other day wasn’t Asuta’s responsibility, but rather Shin and Ludo Ruu’s. At least, that’s what I heard.”

“Yeah, but if he hadn’t gone and started doing business in the post town...” Darmu Ruu started to complain, but then he swallowed his words.

It was none other than Donda Ruu who permitted them to keep doing business in the post town with guards despite the risky situation with the nobles. And the ones on guard duty were Shin and Ludo Ruu, hunters of the Ruu clan. Darmu Ruu had thrown his anger at Asuta during the day, but thinking on it more carefully, the Fa clan really might have been in more of a position to rebuke the Ruu.

He really is annoying...

But even so, Asuta of the Fa clan really needed to be more considerate of his own position.

By this point, Ai Fa could no longer keep on going without him. You could tell that much just by looking at them. If she happened to lose Asuta, Ai Fa would probably also lose the will to live... Just the thought of Ai Fa’s eyes that shone with such a firm light being full of despair instead was more than Darmu Ruu could bear.

Damn it! I swore I wouldn’t run my mouth anymore, so why do I still have to be so worried about all this?!

He reached out for the container of fruit wine, only for another hand to

overlap his from the side.

“Darmu Ruu, drinking nothing but wine is bad for you. Please, eat some food,” Sheera Ruu said, shooting him an incredibly concerned look.

However, Darmu Ruu brushed aside her slender fingers and stroked his right cheek.

“I know to eat without needing you to tell me. Besides, this much wine isn’t enough to do anything to me.”

“But you’ve already had two containers of fruit wine. Aren’t you going a bit too quick?”

Darmu Ruu scratched his head with a sour expression. However, his scar on his right cheek kept throbbing, as if it was expressing its agreement with Sheera Ruu. Since he found it a pain to argue, Darmu Ruu reached out again for that meat with the strange coating. It seemed that everyone had been quite taken by it, as there was only a tiny amount left.

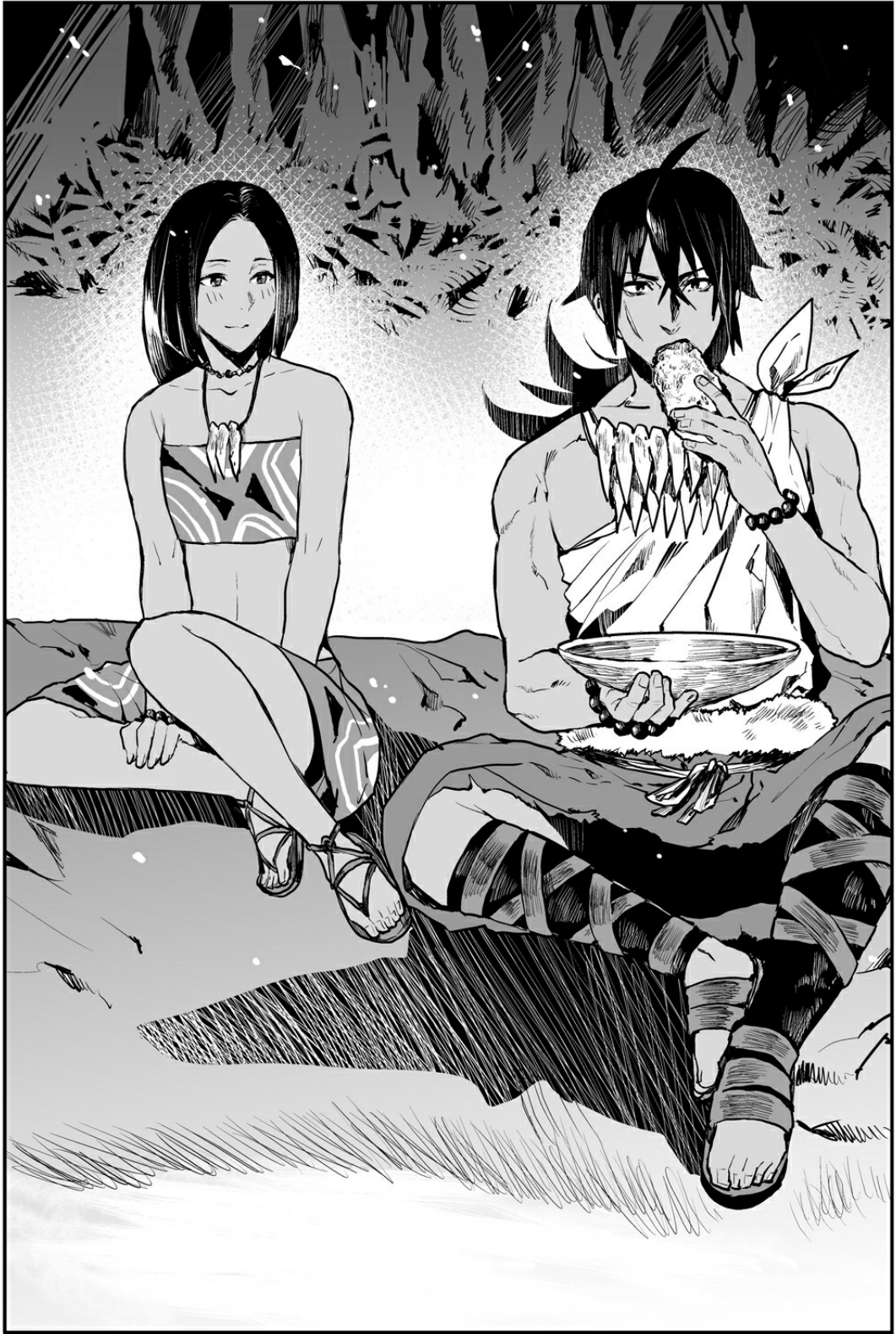
“What do you think of that dish?”

“It’s annoyingly tasty... That man really may know some sort of magic to lead people’s hearts and minds astray.”

“Oh, my,” Sheera Ruu said as she broke out into a smile, a joyful light shining away in her eyes. “Reina Ruu and I were tasked with manning the stove, so I don’t think that should be a concern... And I was the one who fried up those giba cutlets.”

“What?” Darmu Ruu exclaimed in surprise.

“That meat has a slightly darker coating than the others, right? It seems I let it stay in the giba fat a bit too long. Asuta said it wouldn’t be an issue, but I’m finally able to feel at ease now that I’ve heard what you thought of it,” Sheera Ruu stated with another incredibly cheerful grin.



As he bit down on that vexingly delicious meat, Darmu Ruu scratched his head again. "So you can smile like that too, huh?"

"What? Even I smile, you know."

"You're always weeping and stuff when I see you..."

"My... I don't recall ever crying in front of you, Darmu Ruu."

"What are you saying? You're always..." he started to retort, but then he realized he might have just been remembering back to when they were both young. They had grown estranged at some point along the way, but they were still relatives who grew up together in the Ruu settlement. And when they were kids, they would play together regardless of gender and help out the adults with their work.

Now that I think about it, I heard that while Asuta was abducted, Reina and Sheera Ruu took charge of the stalls.

The Sheera Ruu in Darmu Ruu's memories never could have handled such a big role. And besides, no matter how far back he went in his recollections, he could never recall her ever wearing such a bright, resolute smile.

I guess people really do change...

How was he changing, though? He had discovered an unforeseen weakness inside of himself, and worried over what was the proper path to walk in life... Just what sort of fate awaited him, exactly? Darmu Ruu couldn't even imagine.

Can I change too, like Sheera Ruu did? Darmu Ruu thought to himself as the girl's cheeks grew slightly red and she turned away. Even if they were relatives, it was still impolite to keep staring at someone else's face like that.

After a few moments of silence, Sheera Ruu timidly looked up and said, "Darmu Ruu, please take care tomorrow. I'll be awaiting your safe return..."

"Right," Darmu Ruu nodded as he tossed the remaining bit of meat into his mouth.

Despite how late it had grown, there was no sign of the lively banquet atmosphere dying down.

Chapter 2: Welcome to The Westerly Wind

A strange party of two arrived at The Westerly Wind on the seventh of the ashen month.

“Welcome. Are you looking for lodging? Or just a meal?” Yumi called out from the reception desk her parents had asked her to man.

Perhaps because the early afternoon was such an awkward in-between time, there were currently only three men drinking cheap fruit wine in the dining hall at the moment. And as if to avoid the gazes from those men, the pair of newcomers swiftly hurried over her way.

They had the hoods of their cloaks pulled far forward over their heads, almost like easterners. But they couldn't possibly be from Sym. After all, Yumi could spy Jagar-style clothing in the form of embroidered vests and narrow cylindrical pants underneath those cloaks, and one of them was about as small as a kid.

Was it a man and a woman, or perhaps a parent and child? At any rate, it was suspicious for anyone but easterners to be hiding their faces, and the outfits they had on looked way too nice for the post town. As Yumi rested her chin atop her hands, she vaguely thought to herself that these customers must have had some special reason that brought them here.

Well, not that it matters. If they pay up then they're still customers. I'll have to warn them not to mess with any of the ruffians around here.

The pair stopped and stood there in front of the reception desk.

And then, the smaller one made a startling statement. “We finally found you! Long time no see, Yumi.”

“Huh? How do you know my name?”

As Yumi stared in shock, the figure flicked back their hood. The head that appeared from underneath had speckled dark-brown hair and fine facial features.

“Oh, you’re Diel! What’re you doing in a place like this?!”

“You even have to ask? I came to see you,” Diel replied with a pout. At first glance, it looked like a tough, boyish expression, but her face had such slender contours that it was hard to imagine she was a southerner, so even her frown looked cute. This girl was the daughter of a wealthy merchant from Jagar who had come to Genos to do business.

Yumi recognized the young man standing behind her too. She believed his name was Labis, and he acted as Diel’s bodyguard.

“W-Well, you should come over here. Folks might see you if you stand there.” Yumi stepped out from behind the reception desk and led the pair over to the seats furthest out of the way.

It was nothing to brag about, but The Westerly Wind tended to get a lot of rough customers. Since their fees were low, they were frequented by ruffians out of a job, travelers low on funds, and thieves and bandits looking to work with those other groups. To folks like that, seeing someone as well dressed as these two would look like a pair of sitting kimyuus. In fact, those three previous customers drinking their cheap booze had already been stealing glances over their way now and again.

“It was pretty hard to find your inn, Yumi. We ended up searching all over,” Diel complained as she crossed her arms and took a seat.

Looking down at the southerner girl, Yumi replied, “Sorry about that. But we’ve been running this place since my grandfather’s era, so if you want to complain to someone, it’d have to be him. Except his soul was returned to the western god so long ago that I never even saw his face.”

“It’s not like I’m complaining... But if what I said was hurtful, then I apologize.”

“You’ve got nothing to apologize for. But what are you doing wandering around a place like this? I hesitate to say it, but this really isn’t the sort of place folks as well off as you two should be hanging out.”

These were the backstreets of the post town. All the shops here were dicey ones meant for ruffians and the poor, and once night fell you got prostitution

and pickpocketing. When things were especially bad, folks would even be cut down. It was the sort of place where even a guard wouldn't set foot on their own.

Genos was praised as an especially prosperous town even for the western kingdom, but it had a dark side too, with its slums full of lowlifes whose minds teemed with wicked thoughts. Thanks to Genos's prosperity, it also needed a place to scoop up wanderers hoping to benefit from that wealth, or those failures who just couldn't cut it. Just as the saying went, the brighter the light the darker the shadows, and this place was pretty much pitch black.

Even so, Yumi wasn't ashamed of where she was born. Just like nobles weren't born into wealth thanks to their own accomplishments, you didn't have to do anything wrong to be born into poverty either.

Naturally, Yumi felt that thieves and murderers should be properly judged for their crimes. But even folks like that might have only fallen to such depths after facing the agony of having to choose whether to starve to death or become a criminal in order to survive. It might not have excused their actions, but she couldn't bring herself to blame them either.

Because of that, she felt it was fitting for her to be the daughter of an inn that made neither enemies nor allies of that kind of people, instead simply offering them a place to stay the night or a container of fruit wine in exchange for their coins.

"So, what's up?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"I'm asking why you wandered over to a place like this. You came all the way from the castle town because you've got some sort of business with me, right?"

When Yumi asked that, Diel dejectedly hung her head.

Not understanding what was going on at all, Yumi placed her hands onto the table and stared into the other girl's face.

"Well, I can probably guess. You've got business with Asuta rather than me, right? If he's the one you want, he should be working at some other inn around now."

“N-No, you’ve got it wrong! I came here to talk to you, Yumi.”

“Really? Then go ahead and talk already.”

“Right...” Diel answered, keeping her eyes aimed downward for a while until she eventually made up her mind and stared back at Yumi’s face. “W-Well, is Asuta doing all right?”

“Huh? I mean, yeah, he is. He was able to get back to work with the stalls and everything. If you came from the northern road, you must have seen how many customers were buzzing around, right?”

“I did, but still... Have you not seen Asuta much either?”

“I haven’t, since he took over half a month off. When he dropped by yesterday, it sure felt like it had been a while.”

“I see...”

Diel looked distressed as she furrowed her brow and bit her lip. Such a brooding expression really didn’t fit the energetic girl.

“What’s the matter? Did something happen with Asuta?”

“Yeah... I’m sure Asuta must be angry with me, but I just wanted to ask you how he was acting, Yumi...”

“Angry? Why would he be angry? I can’t imagine.”

“Of course you can. When Asuta was kidnapped by Lefreya, I wasn’t able to help him out at all.”

That was already a month in the past by this point. After that, those wicked nobles were taken down, and things were nice and peaceful again.

As Yumi scratched her head, she went ahead and responded, “Lefreya’s that girl who became the head of the house of Turan, right? I heard you ran into Asuta back at their manor, but did something happen between you?”

“The fact that nothing happened is the problem. Asuta was in so much trouble, but I didn’t do anything for him... I never realized at all that that old guy Cyclaeus was such a wicked criminal.”

“I mean, I didn’t know anything about that either.”

“If I had just found some way to slip out of the castle town to let the people of the forest’s edge know where Asuta was, he could have been rescued sooner. But I...”

“Hmm...” Yumi pondered. “I understand that you feel responsible, but it’s not like Asuta’s mad at you or anything. He even said he wanted to buy some new cooking tool from your place.”

“He said that?”

“Yeah. And he was worried that the count being found a criminal might have made a real mess of your old man’s business too.”

“That’s because Asuta’s way too kind...” Diel said, her expression growing even gloomier as she once again hung her head. Meanwhile, her attendant just sat there silently the whole time, looking displeased.

“Hey, wouldn’t it be quickest to just ask Asuta directly? I think he should be working at The Great Southern Tree or The Sledgehammer around now.”

“No, I just don’t have it in me to face him.”

As Yumi thought to herself how hopeless this was, she gave a shrug of her shoulders. Folks from Jagar tended to be highly emotional, and openly so, but that seemed to be working against Diel right now. She seemed to have a one-track mind, and was prone to being tossed around by her own feelings.

You really need a bit more cunning to get by.

Still, Yumi was rather fond of Diel. Maybe it was because Diel grew up dealing with nobles, but she could be both cheeky and ignorant about the way the little guys lived...and yet she had a charm about her that overcame all that. Since Yumi tended to be especially frank for a westerner, she saw the fact that this girl wore her feelings on her sleeve as a positive rather than a negative.

“By the way, where are you living now that you moved out of that count’s place? Asuta asked around, but he said he hadn’t learned anything definitive yet.”

“We’re currently staying at a manor near the castle... And someone from Duke Genos’s house is renegotiating our business deals.”

“D-Duke Genos’s house? So you’ve reached the point where you’re doing business with the lord of the land directly?”

“Yeah, since he took up the deals we had with that old man.”

It really was unbelievable. Yumi had only ever seen nobles from a distance. After all, it was impossible to imagine anyone from that arrogant lot ever letting themselves be seen in the post town. That even went for the Saturas house that ruled over the post town. The lord of Genos himself was like some far off presence who lived up in the heavens above.

And this girl is staying in some manor belonging to the duke’s house, while Asuta has gotten to where he can serve his cooking to nobles.

At present, Asuta’s name had spread all throughout Genos. The story was getting around that he served giba cooking to Duke Genos, and that it earned enough approval to be seen as no lesser than cooking from the castle town. As a result, apparently business at the stalls and inns had been booming since he reopened yesterday. With the stalls in particular, they got so much business that the guards ended up getting called.

Still, yesterday Asuta was just the same as always, all fired up thinking about how he needed to meet his customers’ expectations. To a foreigner like Asuta, nobles, folks from the post town, and even the people of the forest’s edge must have all been nothing but fellow human beings.

And even as someone born and raised in the post town, it wasn’t like Yumi couldn’t get how he felt. She wasn’t fond of those self-important nobles, but she felt much the same about bandits and their ilk. At any rate, nobody could help how they were born.

No matter how poor someone might be, there were still good and bad people out there. And that went for the nobles too. It was even true of the people of the forest’s edge, who were called vicious barbarians. Those opinions had only grown all the stronger in Yumi as she strengthened her ties with that last group in particular.

“Anyway...” Yumi started to say, only for the rear door to suddenly open. A moment later, her mother appeared through it carrying a large cloth bundle.

“Oh, my, did I keep our customers waiting? My apologies. Please, go ahead and order whatever you’d like.”

“A-Ah, welcome back. What’s dad up to?”

“Your father is around back handling the firewood. So, your order?” Yumi’s mother repeated with a smile as she sat her large burden behind the reception desk.

With a vague nod, Yumi quickly whispered into Diel’s ear. “Sorry, but could I have you order something? I’ll get chewed out if it looks like I’m bringing people who aren’t even customers into the inn.”

“Ah, my apologies. We’ll be leaving, then. Sorry for interrupting your work.”

“Hey, if you leave now, I’ll still get scolded for it,” Yumi retorted, devising a plan. “Our food’s nothing special, but just grab something to eat while we talk. You could even just get some fruit wine or whatever.”

“If we head back after drinking fruit wine, then my dad will get real angry with Labis,” Diel murmured, prompting the young man guarding her to break out in an even more displeased look.

“If you order me to do so, then I must obey.”

“I won’t order you to do something like that. Anyway, in that case could we get some sort of light snack? Just enough for one would be fine.”

“Right, thanks. Mom, could we get a single order of kimyuus grilled in milk fat over here?”

“Got it!” Yumi’s mother replied as she rolled up her sleeves and disappeared into the kitchen.

As she watched her leave, Diel tilted her head in a way that looked like some sort of small animal.

“Now that I think about it, I’ve been smelling a lot of milk fat lately, even at the stalls alongside the road. Has it become popular in the post town?”

“Actually, I’d say it’s just the fact that you can get it in the post town at all, now that it’s started to become available over the past half month or so. Before then, I didn’t even know it existed,” Yumi explained with a shrug of her

shoulders. “Apparently Asuta was behind that too. Thanks to our connections with him, we were able to start handling milk fat and poitan really early.”

“Poitan? You can use that stuff in cooking?” Diel asked, only to hurriedly cover her mouth. “S-Sorry! I wasn’t trying to mock the post town or anything...”

“You don’t have anything to apologize for. Even here in the post town, it wasn’t very long ago that nobody ate poitan. It was only ever sold to the people of the forest’s edge and travelers,” Yumi replied, and then she suddenly thought of something. “By the way, you came all the way to Genos from Jagar, didn’t you? So you must have eaten poitan along the way, right?”

“Yes, of course. It’s possible to carry fuwano flour with you too, but it can be ruined by moisture or get bugs in it. That’s why poitan is always used for traveling. If you boil it with tau oil and sugar, it’s at least not totally inedible.”

“Ooh, tau oil and sugar are pretty hard to get ahold of in the west. Or I guess I should say, in the Genos post town...”

Diel sat there silently, offering no response.

Yumi chuckled. “Hey, you don’t have to get so uncomfortable over every little thing. It’s not your fault you have money, right?” she said, rustling Diel’s short hair.

“Cut it out,” Diel grumbled, shaking her head.

In the meantime, the aroma of milk fat cooking wafted out of the kitchen. And in no time flat, the drunks started raising a fuss from their table, “Hey, that smell sure is making me hungry!”

“That’s the smell of milk fat. Must be nice to have money to burn.”

Yumi turned their way and shot them a smile too.

“If you want to eat delicious food too, then you need to get out there and work. You aren’t going to earn any coins drinking wine in the middle of the day, now are you?”

“Aw, shut it. I don’t take orders from some girl at an inn.”

“If we had any income, we wouldn’t be hanging out in a dingy hole in the wall like this.”

“Oh, is that what you really think? In that case, you should work hard so you can at least afford to eat in a cheap place like this.”

“That’s for sure,” a man laughed back while taking a swig of his fruit wine.

As Diel looked up at her face with bewilderment, Yumi asked back, “What is it?”

“Nothing, I was just thinking it’s a surprise that it doesn’t turn into a fight when you argue with customers like that...”

“The post town has its own way of doing things, and so does each individual shop. If you try to just grin and bear it, you’ll only invite more trouble around here.”

As they had that exchange, Yumi’s mother poked her head out of the kitchen. “It’s all done, so come carry it out.”

“On it.”

As Yumi stepped into the kitchen, her mother leaned in close and whispered, “Hey, who are those two? They’re dressed up almost like nobles, aren’t they?”

“They aren’t nobles. She’s just the daughter of a merchant who does business in the castle town.”

“That’s practically the same thing. You shouldn’t get too involved with inscrutable folks like that, you know.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Yumi replied as she took the plate from her worried mother and returned to the table. “Sorry for the wait. Here’s your kimyuus grilled in milk fat. That’ll be three red coins.”

“Right, thanks,” Diel replied as Labis held out a coin.

Since he had given her a white coin, Yumi had to head over to the reception desk again to make change.

“Now then, eat up before it gets cold. Not that I know if it’ll be to your tastes, though.”

It was the second most expensive dish currently on the menu at The Westerly Wind, after the karon grilled in milk fat.

The dish was prepared by taking kimyuus breast meat pickled in salt and grilling it in milk fat together with stalks of myamuu and thin strips of aria. At first Yumi was concerned about how it would turn out, mixing together two ingredients with powerful aromas like milk fat and myamuu, but when she actually tasted it, it turned out to be surprisingly good. And besides, she tended to be fonder of kimyuus than tough karon leg meat anyway.

The round baked poitan beside it also used karon milk in its batter. The messenger from the house of Saturas had given instructions on how the milk left over after the fat was extracted could best be used, either by adding it to a poitan batter or using it in a soup dish.

The flow of karon milk and poitan flour into the post town was due to the houses of Saturas and Daleim, and apparently was the result of some confrontation with the house of Turan. But regardless of any such hidden machinations, those ingredients had brought about a complete change in the cooking on offer in the post town.

Anyone with the money to spare sought out and enjoyed dishes using milk fat. Since it still wasn't possible to get fatty karon torso meat or kimyuus with the skin still on it, the addition of milk fat really did have a huge impact on the post town's cuisine.

Asuta said that even more ingredients may start flowing into the post town, so just what will happen then? Yumi pondered as she watched Diel timidly bring the food to her mouth.

"Well? Don't worry about flattering us, just go ahead and give your honest impression."

"Hmm... The smell is nice, but it seems lacking somehow with only the salt for flavoring. I think just adding some tau oil would make it a lot tastier..."

"You folks from Jagar sure do love your tau oil! Well, not that I don't know how tasty it can be myself..."

On her father's orders, Yumi had sampled numerous dishes from The Great Southern Tree in order to confirm Asuta's skill. She had tried out cubed giba meat stew, meat and chatchi stew, and some kind of soup dish, all of which used tau oil. It went without saying that Asuta was highly skilled and the giba

meat was delicious, but the tastiness of that tau oil definitely played a role too.

“You try some too, Labis. You’re fine as long as it’s not giba meat, right?”

“No, please do not hold back on my account.”

“Huh?! If I eat it all myself, my stomach will get all full and I won’t be able to eat dinner. Wouldn’t that be rude toward the folks from the manor?”

After that complaint from Diel, Labis reluctantly picked up a spoon. He scooped up a bit of poitan, kimyuus meat, and aria, then bit down with his sturdy-looking teeth.

“Well? Any chance I could hear your impression too?”

“It isn’t bad at all... However, the flavor is a bit lacking with just the salt, and this poitan seems dry and hard to get down.”

“Ah, should we have added gigo to the poitan after all? That should make them the same as the ones Asuta uses in his stalls.”

It would make the ingredient costs a bit pricier, but that really might have been the way to go. Although, they were already working out the price of adding new ingredients in the form of karon milk and poitan flour.

It was possible to get poitan for cheaper than fuwano, but on the other hand you could only get a little bit of milk fat out of milk. And apparently, Yumi’s parents were concerned with how to raise the quality of their cooking without also lowering their profits.

Still, Yumi figured those concerns would only last for a few more days.

“The truth is, there’s a plan in place to start offering giba cooking here too.”

“Huh?” Diel exclaimed in shock, turning Yumi’s way.

“The issue had already been raised more than a month ago. But thanks to those nobles, it ended up getting pushed back a whole bunch. Still, Asuta needs to break through my old man’s hard head first, but I figure there’s no need to worry about that, with his skills.”

“I see... I’m glad to hear it.”

With a rather lonesome expression, Diel gave a sigh.

Figuring that was really unfitting for her, Yumi once again rustled the girl's hair.

"I want to see Asuta trying harder than ever before, with us as his business partner. And he's been saying he wants to purchase a cooking tool, so can't you go find out what he's after?"

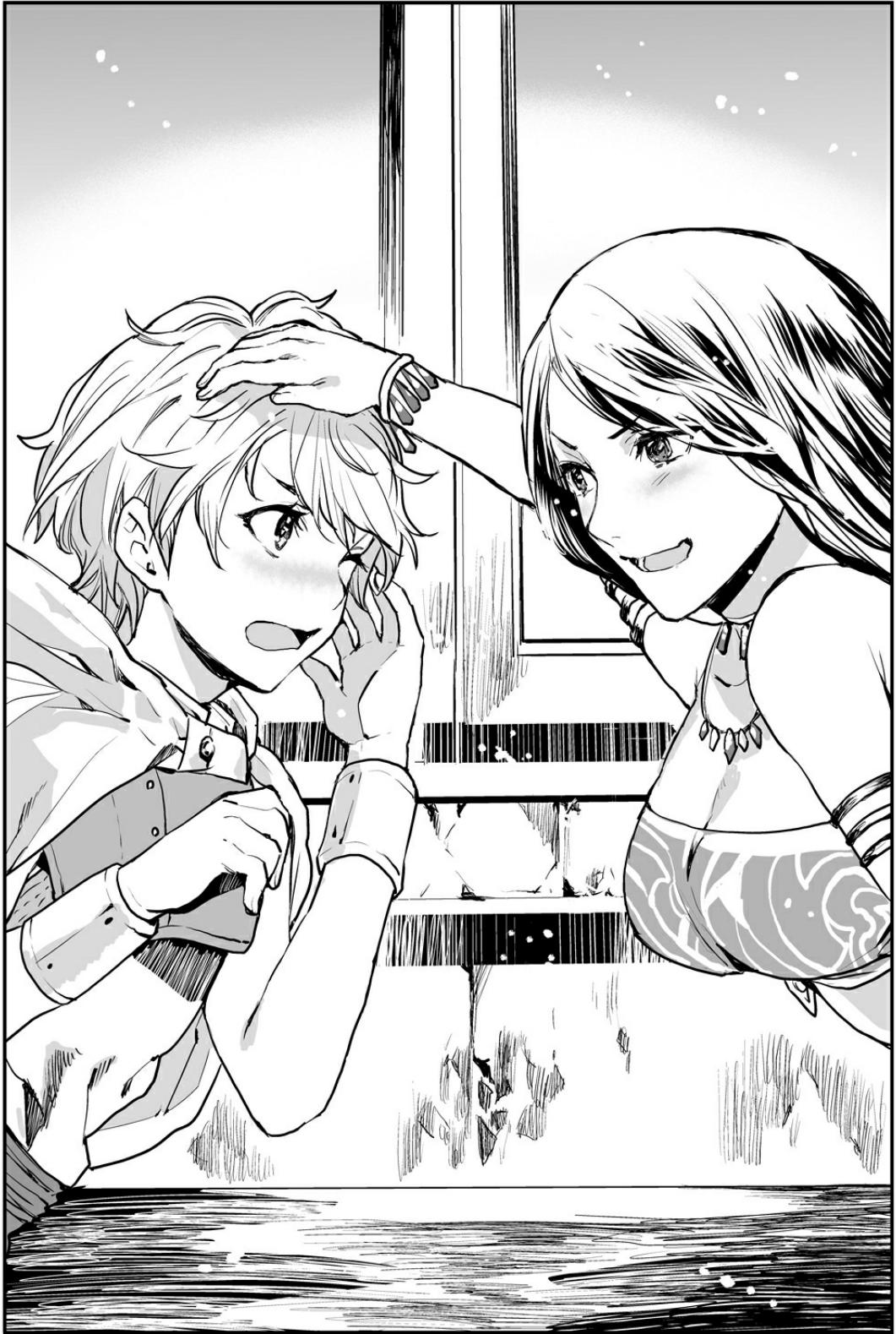
"B-But they sell cooking tools in the post town too, don't they?"

"Yeah, but only cheap stuff. When he bought that meat-cutting knife from you, he looked real satisfied, didn't he?"

"I mean, I'd be glad if I could sell Asuta something too, but still..." Diel replied, her eyes listlessly drooping as she fixed her disheveled hair with both hands.

And then, Yumi suddenly brought her face in close. "You know, you're cute when you're acting all weak and helpless, but it'll turn unpleasant if you push it too far."

"I-I'm not cute or anything to begin with."



“Listen, just go to Asuta directly and talk things through with him. You’ll definitely regret it if you have to head back to Jagar with things like this, right?”

Diel pursed her lips as she stared right back at Yumi. The girl’s eyes shone a beautiful green like genuine jade.

“All right... I’ll try talking to Asuta.”

“Ah, so you finally worked up the courage?”

“Yeah. I didn’t want to see Asuta because I was afraid of him looking coldly at me...but that’s all the more reason I need to apologize to him properly rather than running away.”

At that, Diel broke out in the first smile she had shone since entering the shop. It was as if the sun had finally broken through a cloudy sky. Yumi really did adore that smile of hers.

“I’ve finally made up my mind. Thanks, Yumi.”

“No problem. It really wasn’t all that big of a deal to begin with, right?” Yumi replied with an awkward laugh.

“Yeah,” Diel enthusiastically nodded back. “Okay, I’ll probably stop by again three days from now. And I’ll make sure to drop by the stalls then, so could you let Asuta know?”

“Huh? Why not settle things today?”

“I-I just couldn’t do it today. But I’ll get my feelings in order by then!”

“Hmm?” Yumi grinned.

It was just then that a group passed through the front door.

“Um, is this The Westerly Wind?”

Diel turned and looked in shock.

There were three people standing there. One was a tall blond man, another was a boy with flaxen hair, and the third was a boy whose hair was black. Out of that group, the black-haired boy looked every bit as shocked as Diel.

“Diel?! What are you doing in a place like this?”

“She came here to see you of course, Asuta. I had her sample some of our cooking until you were done with work,” Yumi answered with a smile.

Her slender shoulders trembling, Diel’s face went bright red as she shouted, “You tricked me!”

“I wasn’t particularly *trying* to trick you or anything. But Asuta’s got to deal with my dad after this, so go ahead and settle things first,” Yumi said, patting the angry southerner girl on the head. As she did so, she shot Asuta smile and said, “Welcome to The Westerly Wind, Asuta.”

Chapter 3: A Five-Day Ordeal

1

It was as if their forest home was ablaze.

At the Ruu settlement, either the first or second largest at the forest's edge, there were bonfires roaring away. Such flames were never lit so late at night unless it was a large banquet.

However, this was no banquet. More than the bonfires, the unexpected heat and brightness filling that space came from an intense, fiery anger.

"Should we really be having a relaxed debate here?! We should march on the castle town right this very moment!" Gulaf Zaza, one of the three leading clan heads, roared. "Regardless of their reasoning, they pointed a blade at a person of the forest's edge! That can only be met with blades of our own! What reason could there be to hesitate?!"

"Hold on, please. We have no proof that the criminal behind this incident really was Cyclaeus." Gazraan Rutim, who had still somehow managed to retain his calm, desperately tried to persuade Gulaf Zaza.

Voices whirled about like an inferno, both in agreement and opposition.

"Do you really think some random stranger would go pointing a blade at a person of the forest's edge at a time like this? That couldn't possibly be! Besides, didn't the inn owner who was also attacked testify that the culprits were dressed like nobles?!"

"Even so, there's no solid proof that any noble was behind the attack. And if it turns out Cyclaeus really isn't at fault, then it would become a case of us people of the forest's edge throwing out false accusations at the ruling class."

"Ruling class?! In the end, they just look down on us people of the forest's edge, not caring a lick about how we're treated! I can't see any reason to keep on devoting our swords to fools like that!"

Gulaf Zaza was raging at the fact that people of the forest's edge had been openly attacked in broad daylight. Their people could not accept one of their own having a blade pointed at them. And considering those fiends had done so not only toward the foreign-born Asuta, but also the Ruu men guarding him, they were clearly enemies of the forest's edge.

A great number of those present raised angry shouts, feeling much the same as Gulaf Zaza. In fact, the majority seemed to be in agreement with the furious leading clan head.

Present were the residents of the Ruu settlement, representatives of the clans under them, the several clan members brought along by Gulaf Zaza and Dari Sauti, and the heads of the Fou, Ran, and Sudra clans, who had close ties to the Fa.

Rage burned bright in the eyes of all the men as they shouted as if competing to be the loudest.

As for the women, they silently stared at those men with pain and sadness filling their gazes.

Once again, Ai Fa thought to herself how it was as if the settlement itself had caught fire.

"Aah... I can hardly believe such a thing is happening..." a feeble voice said from behind Ai Fa. When she turned to look, she found Jiba Ruu standing there supported by Rimee Ruu, who was on the verge of tears. "This commotion is almost like when the forest to the south burned and we lost our home... How terrible... And what sad voices too..."

Ai Fa wasn't able to bring herself to offer anything in response. After all, she was more furious than anyone present, utterly unable to keep her calm. It was impossible to tell what sort of angry bellow would come bursting forth if she were to open her mouth. And so Ai Fa was using every last bit of strength she had to desperately force down her rage, instead simply watching everyone else in their frenzy.

"Didn't you acknowledge Asuta of the Fa clan as a friend, Gazraan Rutim?!" Gulaf Zaza angrily shouted. "That man you call friend has been kidnapped by criminals using cowardly, violent means! How can you stay so composed in the

face of that?!”

“My heart is filled to the brim with anger and regret. If it were acceptable to do so, I would force my way into the castle town even if it meant cutting down the gatekeepers, and demand to search for Asuta,” Gazraan Rutim declared, taking care not to raise his voice...and yet, there was an anger no less intense than Gulaf Zaza’s blazing in his eyes. “Yet that is precisely why I am striving my hardest to remain rational. If we turn our blades on a noble of Genos without just cause, we could lose everything. Above all else, I hope to avoid having Asuta become the spark that leads to our people losing their very future.”

“Then what are you saying we should do?” Donda Ruu interjected. “After all, Asuta of the Fa clan has been kidnapped. Cyclaeus is holed up in the castle, and the only response we’ve gotten back is that we should leave everything to the guards. You’re not saying we should wait and do nothing for the next five days until Cyclaeus returns, are you?”

“Of course not. I believe we should launch our own search for Asuta.”

“How would we do that, and where?”

“If Cyclaeus and the soldiers insist that the culprits are not in the castle town, then we’ll have to search *everywhere else*. If we cannot find Asuta after all that, then we can insist the criminals really must be in the castle town, wouldn’t you say?”

“What a roundabout method... Genos is more than just the post town. There’s the Turan lands and the plantations too. I can’t imagine how we could do any kind of proper search of the area in just five days.”

“Do you really think so? We’re looking for someone from Sym with brown hair; a westerner dressed like a noble; and Asuta, who has black hair and the skin color of a westerner, an unusual combination for Genos. I’d imagine it would be rather difficult to hide with such unique appearances,” Gazraan Rutim firmly asserted. “And if we search all the rest of the Genos land, then they would either have to be in the castle town or have fled outside of Genos entirely. If the guards still insist the culprits are not inside the castle town after that, we can pressure them and ask just what proof they have to make such an assertion.”

“I’m in agreement with Gazraan Rutim,” the last of the leading clan heads, Dari Sauti, affirmed as he stepped forward. “Besides, Cyclaeus has no reason to kidnap Asuta at a time like this to begin with. And it just feels too sloppy to have committed this crime right in the middle of the day, and even letting other people see them. If it were Cyclaeus’s plot, I would have expected a bit more cunning.”

“So do you have some other culprit in mind, Dari Sauti?”

“I’d say it’s equally likely to have been the work of Cyclaeus or another party. Someone may be plotting to take advantage of the bad blood between us and Cyclaeus, or it could be that Cyclaeus himself chose such sloppy methods in order to provoke us. Either way, we should proceed calmly and cautiously.”

It seemed that Dari Sauti was even more composed than Gazraan Rutim. Perhaps even the Rutim heir couldn’t remain perfectly calm under the circumstances. But, Ai Fa thought to herself, that was only natural if he was feeling the same things that she was.

“Furthermore, didn’t those villains say that they wished to welcome Asuta as a guest? Obviously we cannot know whether or not those words were truthful, but if they wished to take his life, they could have easily done so then and there. Since it seems they aimed to capture Asuta rather than kill him, I would say that there’s no need to be in such a fluster.”

“That may be so, but still...”

“Besides, it isn’t the custom of the forest’s edge to allow yourself to swing your blade in anger. It’s true that it may be roundabout to search the surrounding land to prove that the culprits must be in the castle town, but it fits with our ways,” Dari Sauti continued, his eyes instantly lighting up. “Once we do everything we can and believe with certainty we have found the truth, then we can swing our blades, and we’ll do it with our full strength behind them. As one of the leading clan heads I, Dari Sauti, offer my support to Gazraan Rutim’s words.”

“And what if Asuta of the Fa clan loses his life thanks to that roundabout method?” Gulaf Zaza grumbled.

Dari Sauti regained the composed look in his eyes as he replied. “If that time

comes, then we people of the forest's edge will have no choice but to use all our strength to make certain those criminals pay for their crimes. Even if it means making enemies of all of the nobles and losing our second home here at the forest of Morga."

It seemed that things had been settled.

Gulaf Zaza held his tongue while still looking angry, and Donda Ruu spoke up in his place.

"In that case, the Ruu and our subordinate clans will start heading into town beginning tomorrow, since we fortunately happen to be in our break period."

"Will the Ruu and the clans under them be enough for the search?" the Fou clan head questioned, sounding dissatisfied. Slowly, Donda Ruu turned to face him.

"We cannot have all the hunters of the forest's edge abandon their duty. We have to do things properly."

Ai Fa turned aside, having given up on the matter.

However, Donda Ruu then called out from behind her, "Hold on. Just where exactly are you going, Ai Fa of the Fa clan?"

"That much should be obvious. Now that the path forward has been decided, I am returning to the Fa house to prepare for tomorrow," Ai Fa answered, feeling as if her voice was on the verge of cracking. "You leading clan heads have made up your minds, and I will not act to oppose you. That much is only natural for a person of the forest's edge."

"Hmph... Those words are no lie, are they? If you intend on departing for the castle town all on your own, we'll have no choice but to bind your limbs and make you obey our decision."

"Try it if you dare!" Ai Fa shouted as she turned to face Donda Ruu, losing her calm.

Rimee Ruu threw her arms around the older girl, clinging to her and shouting, "Ai Fa!"

As Ai Fa gritted her teeth, she somehow managed to force down the powerful

emotions billowing up inside of her.

“I swear to the mother forest that I am not lying... I will abide by the decision set by the leading clan heads.”

Surprisingly, Donda Ruu remained perfectly calm as he looked down at Ai Fa. However, his eyes were blazing away even more fiercely than anyone else present.

“Ai Fa, it’s only natural that you can’t remain calm and composed. It’s possible that if it were my family that had been kidnapped, I wouldn’t be able to restrain myself from taking up my blade. That is precisely why I asked your true intentions... If the pain is too much to bear, then you can stay with the Ruu clan.”

“I’ll be fine. It’s possible that Asuta will make it back on his own, so I can’t leave the Fa house vacant.”

“In that case, shall I have someone from the Ruu accompany you?”

“That’s not necessary. However, please allow me to accompany you to town tomorrow.”

“Do as you please,” Donda Ruu grumbled, staring straight back at Ai Fa.

Ai Fa patted Rimee Ruu on the head, gave Jiba Ruu a nod, and then headed for where she left Gilulu over by the main house.



Although Ai Fa had returned to the Fa house alone, she simply couldn’t get to sleep. Anger and irritation were filling her up inside like boiling water. It was as if the very blood in her body was turning to steam.

And on top of that, she felt like a gaping abyss filled with despair had opened wide beneath her. She could lose Asuta forever... That thought alone was enough to tear Ai Fa’s body and soul to shreds.

If she thought it was absolutely the right thing to do to stay here, she would bear as much anguish as it took. And if she could rescue Asuta by heading to the castle town on her own here and now, she would overcome any hardships in her path.

However, Ai Fa had no way of knowing which was the proper choice. Should she make a move? Should she not? Ai Fa just didn't know, and thanks to that, she agonized, feeling like she would be torn in two.

Mother forest...please, grant Asuta your protection...

No matter how much she prayed, it didn't ease her aching heart.

But all Ai Fa could do was keep on praying as she gripped the necklace Asuta had gifted her and crouched down on the floor, feeling like she would start spitting up blood at any moment.

I'm a wreck... I can no longer live on my own like I did back then...

When Ai Fa lost her parents and every last bond she had, the only thing she could do was make up her mind to live on alone. If everyone feared earning the anger of the Suun and wouldn't acknowledge a female hunter, then there was no other choice left to her. And so, Ai Fa had spent two whole years all by herself.

However, Ai Fa had experienced Asuta's warmth. She had fully remembered the joy that came from living with someone else and sharing both good times and bad.

Thanks to Asuta, Ai Fa had reforged her bonds with Rimee and Jiba Ruu, as well as the people of the Fou and Ran clans. And she had even formed new bonds with the Sudra and Deen, and the clans under the Ruu. But to Ai Fa, Asuta remained her only family.

He was the only one she wanted to live alongside as a member of her house. Nobody could ever replace him. Just like nobody could replace her friends Rimee and Jiba Ruu, no one could replace Asuta as her clan member.

If she lost Asuta, her heart would surely shatter into a million pieces. If she no longer had her single precious clan member and found herself facing the same sort of loss she did two years ago, could she endure it as she was now? No matter how deep she searched in her heart, she had no confidence that she would be fine.

Had she grown weak?

No, she had surely grown stronger thanks to Asuta.

She wanted to live alongside him, sharing their happiness. As that feeling had grown stronger, a great power had filled her body and soul, allowing her to hunt more giba than ever before.

She had grown stronger.

And she feared the sense of loss that would overwhelm her were she to lose that strength.

She wanted to feel Asuta's warmth with her body. To hug him tight. To press her cheek firmly against his as he foolishly shouted, "What are you doing?!" Ai Fa wrapped her arms around her own body, trying to hold back all those powerful emotions attempting to burst forth.

If she let herself lose control, she would surely end up crying in an unsightly heap. And if that happened, she got the feeling she would never be able to pull herself back together. Thus, Ai Fa used every last bit of strength she had to keep on holding herself back.

Should...should I go take a look at things in town?

That impulse hit her like a raging river.

Surely there was no crime in just heading to town. As long as she didn't scale the walls surrounding the castle town, she wouldn't be breaking the laws of Genos or the forest's edge.

She knew that nothing would come of heading to town so late at night with no clear purpose. It would be for the best to simply get a bit of rest for the sake of tomorrow. But even so, Ai Fa wasn't able to overcome the impulse welling up from somewhere deep inside.

I'll go to town and take a look at the gate and walls to the castle town without the gatekeepers noticing... That much should be fine. Then if I can just tell myself that Asuta's still alive and well despite being confined, maybe that would ease at least a little of my suffering...

Ai Fa stood up, put on her hunter's cloak, hung her sword from her hip, and headed toward the door. Gilulu was curled up asleep, but he slowly opened his

eyes.

“My apologies, but I want you to do just a little more work today, Gilulu,” she said while lightly patting his head, only for the tolos to give a confused blink.

It was right at that very moment that there was a knock on the door.

Astounded, Ai Fa froze in place.

“Asuta... Is that you, Asuta?!”

Despite her expectations, reality was cruel. After all, the frail voice that replied “No...” from the other side of the door clearly belonged to a woman.

Ai Fa was so despondent that she felt like she would collapse to the ground at any moment, but she went ahead and removed the bolt. Even so, she kept her guard up with her grip around her sword’s handle as she opened the door, only to find Saris Ran Fou standing there.

“Ai Fa, that outfit... You’re not intending to head into town alone, are you?!” Saris Ran Fou wondered, her eyes opening wide in shock out in the dark.

However, Ai Fa was the one who felt truly astounded. It had been two whole years now since Saris Ran Fou had last come to visit her.

“I’m begging you, Ai Fa, don’t do anything reckless. It was decided that you would search for your clan member Asuta alongside the Ruu tomorrow, wasn’t it?”

Saris Ran Fou clung to Ai Fa’s shoulders. In the past two years, Ai Fa’s old friend had ended up about two and a half handwidths shorter than her.

But it was the Fou woman Saris Ran Fou standing before her now, rather than her childhood friend Saris Ran. Even so, the hands grasping Ai Fa’s shoulders felt just as warm as they used to.

“Saris Ran Fou... What in the world brought you to visit the Fa house?”

Even if they ran into each other along the road or at the washing place, Saris Ran Fou would just timidly avert her gaze, and certainly wouldn’t ever approach Ai Fa. And yet now the woman was clinging to her shoulders, staring right at her with tearstained eyes. Ai Fa didn’t even know what to think of this development.

As she stared at the female hunter, Saris Ran Fou whispered, "I was worried about you... When I thought about how much grief and sorrow you had to be feeling at the loss of the clan member you opened your heart to... Well, I just couldn't sit still."

"But why?" Ai Fa questioned, only for the tears to start streaming down Saris Ran Fou's face.

"I betrayed you two years ago... Both the Ran and Fou clans cut off ties with the Fa out of fear of the Suun, and I..."

"You're not to blame for any of that, Saris Ran Fou."

Around when Ai Fa had built up that bad blood with the Suun clan two years ago, the bond between the two of them was severed. The reason was that the man Saris Ran Fou (Saris Ran at the time) was set to marry had become taken with Ai Fa.

That Fou man secretly asked Ai Fa to marry him instead. Naturally, she turned down his request. However, Saris Ran had seen that exchange. After that, Saris Ran had married a different Fou man and had a child. And the first Fou man who betrayed her ultimately married another Ran woman instead.

As a result, the Fou and Ran reforged their bonds while cutting all ties with the Fa. But that was all due to the bad blood Ai Fa had with the Suun, as well as her desire to become a hunter despite being a woman, so Saris Ran Fou held no responsibility for what occurred.

"That's not true. While the Fou and Ran clan heads banned us from interacting with the Fa clan, I accepted that of my own will. My fear of the Suun won out over my thoughts and feelings for my childhood friend... And on top of that, I was jealous of your beauty."

"That's..."

"It's the truth! I'm a foolish woman who could never live as proudly as you," Saris Ran Fou shot back, burying her face in Ai Fa's chest.

What a small, slender body, Ai Fa vaguely thought to herself.

"I'm not qualified to call myself your friend, Ai Fa... And yet, I still don't want

to lose you... Please, don't do anything reckless..."

"I never intended to oppose the decision set by the leading clan heads... I simply was going out to check on the state of the town."

"Really...?" Saris Ran Fou asked, lifting her tear soaked face.

Looking down at her, Ai Fa nodded and replied, "Really. And also, I've always thought of you as a friend, Saris Ran Fou. Even if we have not been able to act as such, it was my father and mother and my friendship with you that shaped me up until the age of fifteen. And I haven't ever forgotten those feelings, not for even a single day."

Saris Ran Fou's face scrunched up as she broke down sobbing, hugging Ai Fa as tight as she could. Her body was so slender, small, and warm.

Nobody could replace Asuta. However, the same was also true of Saris Ran Fou. Between the despair at having lost Asuta and the joy at having Saris Ran Fou return to her, Ai Fa's feelings were such a jumbled mess that she couldn't even think straight.

And so, the first night of the worst five days imaginable flowed on by, along with Saris Ran Fou's tears.

2

The morning of the following day, the sixth of the white month, after handling all the standard tasks such as gathering firewood and pico leaves, Ai Fa headed to the Ruu settlement, only to find an extraordinary number of people gathered there.

Donda Ruu and Gazraan Rutim were also there, loudly saying something to the crowd. It seemed like they must have been giving out instructions on who was to search where.

"Ah, Ai Fa, I've been waiting for you. Let's both try our best today," Ama Min Rutim greeted her, hurrying over when she saw Ai Fa dismounting from Gilulu. "It seems we'll be searching in pairs of one man and woman each. But since you're a female hunter, I was chosen to pair with you."

“I see. Still, I hadn’t expected this many people would be taking part.”

“Same here. With the men and women put together, there are apparently sixty of us in total. Those remaining at the settlement have to carry out the work of the searchers too, but, well, since half our group are hunters on their break period, it should be fine. Apparently Jiza Ruu and my clan head Dan are in charge of all that.”

So Donda Ruu also intended to use all his might to search for Asuta. It wasn’t as if Ai Fa had doubted that fact, but seeing it like this caused warmth to fill her chest.

It was around then that Ludo and Shin Ruu approached.

“So you made it, huh, Ai Fa? Um, about yesterday...”

“Don’t say any more. Hearing your apology once was plenty,” Ai Fa interjected, cutting him off more harshly than she meant to.

She had been unable to stop herself from breaking down in tears when these two informed her that Asuta was abducted, so she didn’t really want to see them.

Besides, Ludo and Shin Ruu couldn’t exactly be blamed when they were up against Sanjura. After all, that man had seemed to be as strong as Ludo Ruu to begin with. Considering he had Asuta hostage on top of that, it was only natural that they couldn’t oppose him.

Even so, if she had only been there... Still, thinking like that didn’t help anything. She had placed her trust in the Ruu clan and asked them to provide guards. Even if they had failed to live up to that trust, she had no intention of blaming the Ruu clan. After all, what mattered now wasn’t assigning blame, but rather searching for Asuta.

“I know. No matter how many times we apologize, it won’t make our crimes any lighter. I’ll spend my whole life trying to wipe away that shame if that’s what it takes,” Ludo Ruu stated with an unusually intense expression. Shin Ruu had a similar light shining in his eyes too. “Anyway, I have a message from my old man. He wants to borrow the Fa clan’s wagon. Would that be all right?”

“The wagon? What would you do with something like that?”

“We’d have Ruuruu pull it, of course. See, Reina and the others are planning to keep on running the stalls.”

Apparently Reina Ruu had decided that Asuta would come back for sure, so they needed to maintain the bonds he had formed with the post town.

“Besides, lots of folks visit the stalls and inns, right? Sounds like her plan is to share what we know that way. They were in a huge hurry this morning to get everything ready.”

“I see...”

They were all using every last bit of strength they had for Asuta.

He’s all right. He must be, Ai Fa thought to herself, quietly clenching her fists.

“And for your job, because you have a totos, my old man said he wants you to handle the Turan lands, since those are the farthest away.”

“The Turan lands... The area ruled over by Cyclopeus?” Thinking how that was just what she wanted, Ai Fa turned to face Ama Min Rutim. “Well then, we should depart right away. Are you prepared, Ama Min Rutim?”

“Yes, I’m good to go.”

“Ah, and start your search with the houses on the north side. Another group is starting from the south, so you should meet up in the middle of the Turan lands.”

“Understood. The wagon is off to the side of our house, so feel free to use it.”

“Thanks. It’s a relief to see you doing okay, Ai Fa...”

Ai Fa offered no response to that statement as she straddled Gilulu. Then she reached a hand down for Ama Min Rutim and pulled her up atop the totos.

“All right, let’s get going.”

And so, their days of searching for Asuta kicked off.



The Turan land stretched out to the north of the castle town.

Since the castle town was in between the Turan lands and the forest’s edge, it

was positioned even farther from the post town than the plantations to the south. However, that distance was no issue at all when riding atop Gilulu.

The territory was surrounded by a short wooden fence, meant to ward off giba. Though giba were incredibly strong and fast, they were unable to jump over anything higher than they were tall. And so, the fence only came up to around Ai Fa's chest.

"Still, it seems to be in need of repairs here and there, doesn't it?" Ama Min Rutim gently whispered as she sat atop Gilulu's back, her arms wrapped around Ai Fa's torso. A number of holes were visible along the thick wooden fence, made by giba tusks and horns.

There were even some places that had been hit so hard that the wooden boards were coming loose. That had to be the result of a giba doing a full tackle.

On top of that, there were places where the earth at the foot of the fence had been dug into quite deeply. There was little doubt that some giba had decided to try burrowing under when they couldn't jump over the top. However, it seemed the fence was buried quite deep, as there were no signs of any giba successfully making it past.

"It must have taken a great deal of time and effort to erect such a fence. That may explain why the southern plantations haven't done so."

Ai Fa had no way of knowing anything about that, and at any rate, it had nothing to do with the day's task.

She had Gilulu follow the fence at a quick pace, and he didn't seem to have any trouble at all running on the hard stone path. After a short while, the northernmost edge of town came into view.

The fence ran straight for some distance, before it started to curve into an arc, steadily diverging from the highway. Further north past that stretched the same kind of sparse thickets seen surrounding the post town.

"I can't spy any sort of entrance to the north. Could I have you hold on tight, Ama Min Rutim?"

"Huh?"

Ai Fa had Gilulu advance a bit farther then turn around, leaping over the fence after making an approach run.

“Eek!” Ama Min Rutim adorably shrieked as she hugged her arms tight around Ai Fa’s waist. “Th-That was a real shock. I didn’t know totos could jump so high.”

“Indeed. When a child suddenly leapt in front of us, I pulled on the reins to try to avoid them and carelessly gave Gilulu a kick in the side. He jumped just like that. I was quite shocked at first too.”

“That’s amazing. It’s as if you and the totos are one, Ai Fa.”

“Gilulu is a member of the Fa house, and we understand one another...”

Even so, Gilulu couldn’t replace Asuta either.

Of course, she couldn’t ride Asuta so nimbly, so that went both ways.

“There are fewer houses than I expected...” Ama Min Rutim whispered as she glanced around the Turan lands.

It certainly was a desolate sight. There was a dirt path stretching off to the west, and along it on either side were houses scattered here and there, all made of wood. The homes were bigger than the ones at the forest’s edge and plenty of them had second floors, but they seemed like truly modest structures compared to the inns in the post town and the like.

“Well, I suppose the nobles do all live in the castle town... It feels a bit strange for the one ruling over a land to not actually live there.”

“Indeed. Still, I believe that Cyclaeus does have a manor here as well. After all, the leading clan heads have supposedly met him there.”

As she alertly glanced around, Ai Fa dismounted. And then, she lent Ama Min Rutim a hand to help her down as well.

They were at the northern extreme of the Turan land. If they went west from here and then steadily headed south, that should take care of their task. And if Asuta wasn’t in the castle town, then this land seemed the next most likely candidate.

An even greater strength than before filled Ai Fa’s limbs. As long as she at least had a goal, then she could keep on pushing forward without hesitation.

And so she intended to give everything she had before having to face yet another agonizing night.

“Well then, let’s head around to these houses one by one.”

With that, Ama Min Rutim knocked on the door of the nearest house.

After a few moments of silence, the door creaked open.

“Who are you...? All the young folks are out working.”

They were met by an old woman who looked like a dried aria. Her attire was filthy, and she had a gray rag wrapped around her head. Had she been weaving together grass? Her apron had a great many wood chips stuck to it.

“Our apologies. You see, we’re actually searching for one of our comrades who has gone missing.” Ama Min Rutim started politely explaining, only to be cut off brusquely.

“Some kidnapping in the post town has nothing to do with us. Besides, I’m sure it was the work of some thugs who wandered into town from elsewhere. At any rate, I don’t know anything about it.”

“No, but...”

“The only ones living around here are poor folks who can’t afford to move elsewhere. Even thugs have no business with a place like this. Regardless, you’re interrupting my work, so get going,” the old lady retorted, slamming the door in their faces.

Ama Min Rutim tilted her head a bit and went “Hmm...” as she turned back toward Ai Fa.

“It certainly didn’t seem like she was trying to drive us away in order to hide Asuta or anything...”

“True. And she didn’t even seem to recognize that we were people of the forest’s edge.”

The people of the forest’s edge generally had no business in a place like this. Though it was only ever so slightly removed from the familiar post town, it really did feel like they had come to some foreign nation.

Though they went around to a number of other houses after that, there were only ever old folks home, and they got similar responses each time. On top of that, around half the houses looked dilapidated, like they hadn't been lived in for years, yet there were no traces of anyone using them as part of any crimes.

"A kidnapping in the post town? How dangerous! Still, I can't imagine such criminals would ever flee here to the Turan lands."

It was around ten houses or so before they finally found someone who would properly lend them an ear. She was a plump middle-aged woman holding a small child to her chest, and her eyes sparkled with curiosity as she offered that response.

"At any rate, all the residents in the Turan lands have been here forever, and the number of folks around has been slowly going down. If outsiders tried to blend in, they'd seriously stand out... And since the count ruling the land has all those guards around to protect his orchards, I figure anyone with a guilty conscience wouldn't want to come anywhere near here."

"I see. We haven't happened upon any guards ourselves yet, though."

"The orchards are right smack in the middle of this land, after all! We're only protected from bandits here because we're near the fields," the woman replied in an unamused tone. And her eyes were intently looking over the pair from the forest's edge. "By the way, you two sure have rather odd appearances. Your skin isn't as dark as folks from Sym, but still, just where exactly were you born?"

"We were born here in Genos," Ama Min Rutim replied, which caught Ai Fa off guard.

"Hmm?" the woman murmured with a deeply doubtful look. "Well, whatever. At any rate, you're wasting your time walking around here. You should just leave all that hassle to the guards and head on back home."

"Thank you. And our apologies for bothering you during such a busy time."

That was the last house in the immediate vicinity, and so the pair just walked along down the path, leading Gilulu as they went.

"I didn't bring up the fact that we were people of the forest's edge because I didn't want to cause a commotion unnecessarily. The edge of the forest of

Morga is still Genos territory, so it wasn't a lie, right?"

"Yes, that's true."

"Still, to think that the residents of Turan wouldn't even know what we people of the forest's edge look like. And yet our hunters still serve to protect their fields, so it's a bit of a strange feeling."

"They spoke as if even those fields have nothing to do with them." There was a vague sense of misgiving rising up in Ai Fa's chest. "There's something strange about this place. I cannot sense the same sort of vitality here as I do in the post town."

"Right. But the post town is full of people from other towns and even countries, so it's difficult to say which is really more normal."

Was that truly the case? Ai Fa found herself unconvinced.

But at any rate, they continued on with their search.

After walking for a while, they found a single small house off to the side of the road. When Ama Min Rutim went and knocked on the door, a small girl appeared from inside.

"Yes? What is it?" She was a cute girl, with her dark-brown hair done up in braids which dangled down in front of her chest. She looked to be somewhere between Rimee and Lala Ruu when it came to age. And there was a bright, earnest shine in her light-brown eyes.

On top of that, there was a fragrant aroma drifting out from inside that awoke Ai Fa's stomach. There was still some time left until the sun would hit its peak, but it seemed the girl was preparing a light midday snack.

"Our apologies for interrupting you at such a busy time. You see, we're actually seeking a comrade of ours who has been kidnapped by outlaws..."

Maintaining a polite tone all the while, Ama Min Rutim once again repeated her explanation.

"I'm truly sorry to hear that," the girl replied, her eyebrows drooping. "I was out in the morning handling the shopping, but I didn't notice anything especially unusual in the central area. And around here it's been just as quiet as always."

“Shopping, you say? So is there a shop further to the south, then?”

“No, every few days some merchants from the post town come here, because there isn’t enough business to be had in the Turan lands. The only real shop is the bar in the center.”

Just that short exchange was enough to clearly show how intelligent and kind the young girl was. And on top of that, she seemed to have a great deal of sympathy for their comrade having been kidnapped.

Perhaps sensing all that, Ama Min Rutim went ahead and continued. “Is there anywhere in the Turan lands that someone could be hidden from prying eyes?”

“Hmm, I think that would be really difficult to pull off! Of course, if you bound someone up you could lock them away in a house, but any outsiders prowling about would be noticed right away.”

“Well then, are there any easterners staying in the area?”

“There aren’t. Nobody around here is wealthy enough to buy things from eastern merchants, so they have no reason to come here,” the girl answered with a bit of a fretful look, seemingly finding that fact regrettable. And then, she suddenly turned around. “Ah, I’m sorry, but I have food over the flame! If I don’t stop it soon, the tarapa will burn, so do you mind if I head back in?”

“Of course. Our apologies for interrupting you at such a busy time. And it smells delicious, by the way...” Ama Min Rutim casually added.

“Thank you!” the girl replied with a joyful smile. “If anything comes up, I’ll let the guards know. And keep at it, okay?!”

With that, the girl disappeared behind her door and Ama Min Rutim breathed a sigh.

“I feel a bit relieved seeing such an earnest girl like that. These Turan lands seem like such an unpleasant place to be.”

“Yes, I’m in agreement on that front.”

This land seemed to have a gloomy and lethargic atmosphere. It wasn’t as if the residents of this place had the same sort of stagnant look in their eyes as those living in the Suun settlement used to have, but the air here still felt heavy.

Perhaps it felt that way because the post town was so chaotic and lively in comparison?

At any rate, even an outsider like Ai Fa felt glad to find such a bright and admirable girl living in such a place.

“It may be thanks to that smell from before, but I’ve started feeling hungry. I realize it’s ill-mannered, but do you mind if we eat some jerky as we walk?”

“Of course not.”

To a hunter like Ai Fa, it didn’t feel ill-mannered in the least. And so they continued down the empty path, biting into salty jerky while quenching their thirst with the contents of a leather pouch full of water.

They spied the next big change when the sun was just about at its peak, after visiting around fifty houses. The path heading south widened, and massive fields suddenly came into view.

At that same moment, some sharp-sighted guards came running over from their left and right.

“You’re people of the forest’s edge, aren’t you?! What are you doing in a place like this?!”

There were five of them in total, clad in the same sort of simple leather armor used by the guards in the post town and brandishing long spears.

“We’ve come seeking the whereabouts of our comrade who was abducted from the post town. We have no intention of causing harm to the Turan lands.”

It was now finally Ai Fa’s turn. This was exactly why the pairs had been constructed of one hunter and one woman. The women were tasked with having peaceful discussions with the townsfolk, while the hunters were there for when things got rough.

However, what the guards said next was truly unexpected.

“We already heard tell of that from the post town! So, it wasn’t enough to cause a commotion over there, you want to do the same in the Turan lands as well?!”

“What’s that? What are you trying to say?”

Apparently, there had been a dispute between the people of the forest's edge and the guards in the post town. Ai Fa and Ama Min Rutim had used Gilulu to swiftly arrive at the Turan lands, but on the other end, nearly sixty people of the forest's edge had flooded into the post town in full force. Thinking about it, it was only natural that would lead to some sort of dispute.

"We have no intention of causing a commotion. The reason we came here to these lands was to confirm that the criminals who kidnapped our comrade are not hiding here."

"As if criminals would ever come to the Turan lands! And even if they did, we would capture them without fail!"

"That's good to hear, but is it some kind of crime for us to visit these lands? If not, then I can't see any justification for finding fault with us doing so."

"But...!"

"Entering the castle town without a pass is a crime. That is why we are trying to search the post town and Turan lands instead. Are you saying our actions are against the laws of Genos?"

Just a touch of the anger she was feeling inside might have leaked out in that statement. At any rate, the guards' faces went pale as they thrust out the tips of their spears.

"N-No one is permitted to approach these orchards! That was the law handed down by Count Cyclaeus Turan! If you say that you will not depart from these lands, we ask that you at least remove yourselves from this place!"

"Hmm... Well, I suppose nobody could hide out in a location with such clear visibility. So it goes without saying that we have no business with such a place."

At that, Ai Fa and Ama Min Rutim returned back down the path. And as they did so, the Rutim woman leaned in close.

"Ai Fa, the ones working those fields..."

"Yes. They are the people of Mahyudra that we have heard tell of."

Behind the guards were vast and sprawling fields, and the ones pulling the wagons and tilling the earth with hoes and the like on that land were all huge

blond men. From just a quick glance, Ai Fa saw that there had to be dozens of them there. Cyclaeus had purchased those northerners from slave traders, and used them to carry out his labor.

And Kamyua Yoshu said that Cyclaeus saw neither him nor us people of the forest's edge as fellow human beings.

To Cyclaeus, her people and those of Mahyudra were nothing but tools with which he could amass greater wealth. Was that why he could commit such an outrageous act as kidnapping one of them at blade-point? The thought caused a profound fury to seethe in Ai Fa's chest.

I swear... I shall rescue Asuta with my own two hands.

And yet, night arrived on that day without them having anything to show for their efforts.

There were a number of places that they were not allowed to set foot in, such as Cyclaeus's manor and the housing for the slaves from Mahyudra, but Donda Ruu would come later to negotiate with the guards to search them. At any rate, they were unable to find any other places Asuta or those outlaws could possibly be hiding.

Naturally, they hadn't been able to investigate the inside of each and every house, so there were plenty of places that could have been used for temporary refuge. However, it was hard to imagine a reason to hide in such a place, having to constantly fear watchful eyes. And so, they had completed their search of the Turan lands in just a single day.



The next day's search was of the farm village to the south of Genos. This time around, they had the vegetable seller Dora assisting them.

"I already delivered vegetables to the inns that are regular customers first thing in the morning, and then I went ahead and closed up shop early," he had told them.

This was a man who was also deeply concerned about Asuta. And his daughter Tara who accompanied him still looked like she could break down sobbing at any moment even though two days had passed, just like with Rimee

Ruu.

“You went around the Turan lands yesterday, didn’t you? That place is small and not many folks live there, so I’d bet it wasn’t that much of a hassle, but where we live, everything is big and spread out! You won’t get anywhere without a resident to guide you around.”

Unlike his daughter, Dora looked just as bright and cheerful as always. However, after only a short while together, it became clear that demeanor was nothing but a facade to hide the unease and anger he was feeling inside.

At any rate, they walked the path through the farmlands alongside Dora. Just as he had said, the village really was enormous.

And it wasn’t just the vastness that was an issue, as there was a fairly dense cover of tall trees growing between the fields, flowing rivers cutting off paths, complex terrain, and a lack of wooden fences providing dividers, making it hard to determine where one subdivision operated by the residents ended and the next began. The fields were on a whole other scale compared to the ones in the Turan lands, and there seemed to be many times more houses, and people as well.

“That’s because all the farm work in the Turan lands is left up to the slaves. They don’t have any family, so naturally the number of people there ends up being smaller.”

Supposedly there were hundreds of tenant farmers living in this community in the Daleim lands. Numerous families joined together to manage the fields granted to them by the lord in charge. And this man Dora was the head of a house tasked with the second largest of those fields.

“Well, my eldest son’s the one actually running things nowadays, while I handle sales in the post town. I much prefer dealing with folks there than the lord of the land or nobles or the like.”

“You do business with nobles as well?” Ama Min Rutim casually asked as they walked along a footpath between fields.

“Of course,” Dora replied. “The castle town claims over half of the vegetables we grow. Then I sell the leftover aria and poitan in the post town.”

“They don’t buy aria and poitan in the castle town?”

“Yeah. Supposedly, aria don’t much suit the pretentious tongues of nobles, and poitan... Those are only ever bought by travelers and you people of the forest’s edge.” At that point, Dora stopped and gestured toward the fields stretching wide to his right. “Still, it sure is something, isn’t it? Everything you can see from here is poitan fields.”

That triggered Ai Fa’s curiosity enough to glance out over the vast farmlands. The parched brown earth stretched out endlessly into the distance. However, she couldn’t spy the familiar sight of poitan there, but rather withered vines, leaves, and stems evenly spaced out in the dirt.

“Poitan can grow even in barren soil, and it doesn’t take long to be ready for harvesting. You people of the forest’s edge buy a ton of them, and that alone earns us plenty of profit.”

“Our people do eat two per day at a minimum.”

“Right, and there are over five hundred of you in total, aren’t there? That means you purchase a thousand poitan per day. I don’t think there’s any other town in Genos selling so many,” Dora said, and then he gave a deep sigh. “And lately, Asuta has been buying 150 of them each day. We had to quickly expand our poitan fields to accommodate the new demand. Fortunately, we had plenty of land to the south that couldn’t be used for anything else. And the lord of the land had no issue at all giving consent for us to expand the fields.”

“Is that so?”

“It sure is something, isn’t it? Asuta doing business led to us expanding our fields. He really is an amazing man. But there might not be that many folks in the post town who understand that yet. I truly am proud to have been the first one to come to know him and form a bond. And then *this* had to happen...”

There was a flicker of anger and sadness in Dora’s eyes. Tara had been trudging along beside him, and now she was teary-eyed too. Before long though, Dora shook his head and shot Ai Fa and Ama Min Rutim an apologetic look.

“Sorry about that. As his comrades, you must have it that much tougher. It’s

too much for someone like me to complain like that.”

“That’s not true at all. I feel proud to hear you say such a thing,” Ai Fa interjected without thinking.

“Right,” Dora replied with a big nod. “You’re Asuta’s clan head, aren’t you? Thanks to him, I was able to form a bond with your people despite fearing you for so many years. I pray that you’ll be able to get Asuta back and we can still enjoy the same sort of relationship we’ve had up till now.”

“That is my wish as well.”

And yet, they didn’t have any success in the southern Daleim lands either. The criminals were *not* outside of the castle town. Day by day, that fact was growing ever clearer.

Thanks to Dora’s help, they were able to finish their search of the Daleim lands in a day and a half, and so they spent the back half of the third day assisting in the search of the post town. The post town was densely packed with buildings and people, and on top of that, it got an intense flow of travelers and merchants coming and going, which made it by far the most difficult place to search.

Even so, they managed to wrap up their search of the place on that day. There were no traces whatsoever of Asuta or those criminals staying in the post town or the Turan or Daleim lands.

“We shall use this fact to march on the castle town tomorrow,” Donda Ruu declared that night at the Ruu settlement. “We tried passing the information along to that Melfried noble through our contact, Zasshuma, but the response back was unsurprisingly that he wouldn’t be able to make a move until the morning of the day after tomorrow. But Cyclaeus will also be able to move freely at that point, so I say we must enter the castle town before that.”

It’s finally time... Ai Fa thought to herself, clenching her fists tightly.

Everything up until now had been mere preparations for entering the castle town. But tomorrow, it would finally be time to settle things.

Today was now the fourth day since Asuta had been kidnapped. For every one of those days, Ai Fa had faced such suffering with the arrival of each lonely

night that she thought her very soul would shatter to pieces. If it weren't for Saris Ran Fou coming to check on her in the short time available after dinner, it really was hard to say what would have become of her.

But this was the last of those nights.

She would make certain that was the case.

With such thoughts running through her mind, Ai Fa endured yet another agonizing night.

And then the morning of the next day, the fifth since Asuta's kidnapping, arrived at last. Once again, Ai Fa rode Gilulu to the Ruu settlement, after which she headed with Donda Ruu's group into town.

It was then that *he* appeared. The young red-haired hunter from another land was clad in a cloak made from the fur of some animal other than a giba... He was the son of Goram Redbeard, Jeeda.

"Asuta of the Fa clan is being held in the manor of a noble named Cyclaeus in the castle town. The culprit behind his kidnapping is the noble's daughter, a girl named Lefreya," Jeeda informed them.

Naturally, Donda Ruu and a few of the others thoroughly interrogated Jeeda on the circumstances. However, Ai Fa's memory past that point was hazy. Though she had heard what everyone was saying, she couldn't remember a word of it.

Asuta is alive...

That thought alone filled Ai Fa's heart, body, and soul, leaving her unable to think of anything else. The mother forest hadn't forsaken the two of them. For some time after that, Ai Fa just stood there with her eyes closed, holding back the tears that felt ready to come bursting forth at any moment.

3

"Sorry for the wait. Looks like I somehow managed to get things sorted out, though," Zasshuma said, returning to Ai Fa's group after the sun had hit its peak.

After hearing Asuta's whereabouts from Jeeda, the people of the forest's edge yet again ended up torn on how to proceed. Opinions were split in two, one side saying that they should charge the castle town now that they knew where he was, while the other believed they should stick to the plan of talking to the gatekeepers.

Naturally, they both agreed that in the end they needed to enter the castle town. The difference in opinion came down to whether they should throw the information obtained from Jeeda in the gatekeepers' faces and accuse Cyclaeus's daughter of the crime, or if they should hide that fact and simply request to search for the criminals.

The former group was furious at the fact that it really was the work of a noble. Meanwhile, the latter group insisted things should be handled carefully, as the culprit wasn't Cyclaeus himself, but rather his daughter.

"That Lefreya girl is still just a child. If we carelessly raise a commotion, there's no telling what she may do. That being the case, shouldn't we hide the fact that we know Asuta's location and come up with a plan to rescue him?" Gazraan Rutim argued for the latter group. "Her immaturity and lack of foresight must be what led her to kidnap Asuta by force. And if that short temper is turned on Asuta, she may cause him irreparable harm. Now that we know he is safe, we should act as cautiously as possible."

"Then what are you saying we should do? Sneak into their manor like that Jeeda guy did? Entering into a home without someone who lives there to guide you is against the laws of both Genos and the forest's edge, isn't it?" Rau Lea retorted, a blazing glare in his eyes. On the first night, he had been one of those who argued that they should take up their blades. That rage he felt was due to how much he cared about Asuta, and he also possessed a directness fitting for a person of the forest's edge. "The first ones to take up arms here were the nobles! Thanks to that, we wouldn't be breaking any laws by taking up blades of our own!"

"It wasn't the nobles in general. If we're to believe Jeeda's words, then this was entirely the work of that noble girl Lefreya and her two followers. We can't go making an enemy of all of Genos in trying to make them pay for their crimes..." Gazraan Rutim replied, an incredibly pained look on his face.

In all likelihood, the young hunter could see what sort of future would await them if they took up arms here and now. After all, Gazraan Rutim was quite the thinker for a man of the forest's edge. In his heart, Gazraan Rutim undoubtedly also harbored a strong desire to take up his blade and march on the castle town. However, he possessed the wisdom and reason needed to restrain those raging emotions. Ai Fa found it difficult to judge if that was a strength or a weakness for a person of the forest's edge.

At any rate, as they had that argument in the area between the forest and town, Kamyua Yoshu's acquaintance, the bodyguard Zasshuma, appeared.

"I see, so Cyclaeus's daughter was the culprit, eh? Well, that answers the question of why anyone would do such a thing now of all times. This is no conspiracy. Just some terrible mischief from a girl with no sense."

"You think you can just write this off as mere mischief?!"

"I know that we can't. In a way, this is honestly more troublesome than if Cyclaeus himself had been the mastermind. After all, that girl doesn't get just how serious her actions are. As Gazraan Rutim said, if we act carelessly, she could cause irreparable harm."

This Zasshuma man who could freely come and go even in the castle town seemed to firmly grasp Gazraan Rutim's concerns. And so, as he stroked his stubbly chin, he murmured, "Hmm... Even so, it's not like I can do anything about her all on my own. Maybe the time has finally come where we have to bring in reinforcements."

"Reinforcements?"

"Hold on for just a bit. I'll have to put some thought into whether we have a way to save Princess Asuta without a fuss. Just have a little trust and leave it to me."

"Isn't 'princess' a term meant for noble girls?" Ai Fa questioned doubtfully, which Zasshuma replied to with a disinterested chuckle.

"He's been kidnapped by a wicked noble and can't do anything but wait for someone to save him. In the stories sung by minstrels, that's the role of a princess... At any rate, just give me a little time. I may not be on the same level

as the Northern Whirlwind, but I've gotten pretty accustomed to handling nobles myself."

Zasshuma departed after that, leaving the people of the forest's edge to wait around for a couple hours before finally returning.

"Did you arrange for those reinforcements you mentioned?" Donda Ruu asked as representative for the group.

"Yeah," Zasshuma nodded back. "An eye for an eye, a blade for a blade, and a noble for a noble. I never imagined I'd go pulling that guy into things before the Northern Whirlwind made it back..." It was then that Zasshuma started explaining about Polarth, the second son of Count Daleim. "Lord Polarth is our only ally among the nobles, besides Lord Melfried. With him present, it should be possible to get inside Cycлаeus's manor."

At that point, even if she was Count Turan's legitimate child, she wouldn't be able to simply brush aside her crime of kidnapping.

"Nobles are able to prepare passes too. If we have a woman of the forest's edge accompany Lord Polarth as an attendant or guest or the like, they should be able to clearly identify Asuta. Then you just need to accuse that Lefreya girl of the crime."

"You're saying someone should lie about her background in order to enter Cycлаeus's manor, eh?" Donda Ruu questioned.

Instantly, Ai Fa interjected, "I'll take that crime of lying upon myself. It's a small price to pay in order to save my clan member."

"You'll accompany him?" Zasshuma asked, carefully looking Ai Fa over. "Hmm... Well, you have the clear eyes of a hunter, but you've got an especially pretty face, even for a woman of the forest's edge. As long as you don't go running your mouth, it could work."

"What was that about my face?"

"Hmm? Well, we're talking about accompanying a noble to another noble's manor, so you've got to look like you're of a certain status for the ruse to work. Guess the only choice with that skin color would be to insist that you have mixed blood from Sym."

It really was an unusual plot. Still, the people of the forest's edge didn't know much of anything about the nature of the nobles or the state of the castle town, so this plan seemed much more likely to succeed than them blindly swinging about their blades. And so, despite feeling somewhat uneasy about the matter, the people of the forest's edge accepted Zasshuma's proposal.



"Ooh, I've been awaiting your arrival, Sir Zasshuma! So this is the woman of the forest's edge, then?"

Polarth was a man with a rather unusual appearance. While he was a bit on the plump side, he had the look of a proper adult, except for his strangely guileless face. He had on a white frock with a token amount of adornments, but it really wasn't all that luxurious of an outfit. And despite being faced with a hunter of the forest's edge such as Ai Fa, his expression showed neither scorn nor caution.

"I am the second son of the house of Daleim, Polarth. If you do not mind, could I hear your name as well?"

"I am Ai Fa of the Fa clan, a person of the forest's edge."

"Hmm, that certainly is a fittingly foreign-sounding name for one of your people. And what a splendid appearance you have! I had heard that there were many beauties among the women of the forest's edge, and I see that it is indeed so."

It was considered rude at the forest's edge to make such meaningless remarks about someone else's appearance. However, as there was nothing to be gained from arguing the point here and now, Ai Fa instead remained silent.

"Ah, it's embarrassing to admit, but this is actually my first time interacting with a person of the forest's edge up close and personal. Without your efforts, our lands would be unable to thrive, so I'm deeply grateful to you all."

As had been mentioned during the conversation with Dora the other day, the house of Daleim ruled over the plantations to the south of Genos. Presently, Ai Fa had been brought to that noble house's manor.

With that said though, apparently it was a building generally left to the care of

servants, and the members of the house rarely visited it. In fact, during the search the other day, they had been swiftly welcomed inside, unlike with Cyclaeus's manor in the Turan lands. Of course, Dora had laid the groundwork for that, but Ai Fa had secretly noted that there seemed to be quite a difference between how the various noble houses behaved themselves.

"I have already heard everything from Sir Zasshuma. Still, I never imagined Lady Lefreya would commit such a crime... I'm certain she must have heard tell of the great reputation earned by this Asuta fellow in the post town, and wished to invite him to the manor as a chef."

"As a chef?"

"That's right. After all, Lady Lefreya is well known to be as dedicated a gourmand as her father Count Cyclaeus himself. If she broke her promise to return him to the forest's edge after the first day, then she must be quite taken indeed with Sir Asuta's skills."

"How utterly outrageous..." Ai Fa grumbled, but said nothing more, as she once again felt a violent fury ready to come erupting forth at any moment.

If she wished to taste Asuta's cooking, then she simply could have made a direct request. As long as the leading clan heads offered no opposition, he wouldn't have any reason to refuse. So why had she so flagrantly violated the law by having him forcibly abducted? Ai Fa simply couldn't understand what that girl was thinking in the least.

"Even if her crime is discovered, she may believe she can simply settle the matter with coins. After all, it is generally considered the greatest honor a chef could imagine to be invited to the Turan manor."

"But...!"

"Yes, your anger is only natural. She was even more ignorant of you people of the forest's edge than I. After all, even I know you would not overlook a crime for coins. If she had simply understood that one fact, perhaps things would not have gotten to this point," Polarth said with a smile, as if trying to appease Ai Fa.

Somehow the Fa clan head managed to get her anger under control. There

was nothing to be gained from letting her emotions run wild. For now, she simply needed to devote herself to remaining calm in order to rescue Asuta.

“Well then, could I have you hurry up and change? Sheila, be certain you treat our guest from the forest’s edge properly, understand?”

“Yes, of course.”

The maid known as Sheila stepped forwards, clearly looking a bit nervous. It seemed she was rather wary when it came to the people of the forest’s edge.

“I will guide you to the changing room. This way, please...”

Following the maid’s lead, Ai Fa stepped into the neighboring room. It was rather small, and there was a cloth stretched over the window. Ai Fa had already seen inside this room once during their search the other day.

“Well then, may I take charge of your clothing...?”

“Indeed,” Ai Fa replied, handing over her hunter’s cloak. The girl accepted that, but she didn’t move from her spot. “What else do you need me to hand over?”

“Huh? Umm, I need you to hand over everything aside from your waist cloth...”

“I can change myself just fine. You may be a woman, but I do not care to expose my naked form to anyone who is not one of my people.”

“Yes, but...this outfit was brought by Lord Polarth from the manor in the castle town, so I was ordered to personally assist you.”

“I’m not a child, though,” Ai Fa retorted, furrowing her brow. Atop the table beside them was a pile of some sort of glimmering silver decorative bits. Aside from what looked to be a single piece to go around the waist, she couldn’t spy anything that looked like wearable clothing. Honestly, Ai Fa had no idea what should go where.

Hmph, what a hassle...

Still, her body was bursting with more strength than she had ever known since hearing that Asuta was all right. She could deal with a bit of unpleasantness if it meant saving him. Firming up her resolve with that thought,

she first took off her giba horn and tusk necklace, followed by her grigee bracelet meant to ward off poisonous insects. After that, she took off the cloth attire on her chest and waist as well as her leather footwear, leaving only her single waist cloth.

“Could I have that necklace as well?”

“No,” Ai Fa replied. “This necklace is incredibly precious to me.”

“B-But it wouldn’t go with the other accessories you need to put on...”

Ai Fa shook her head back and forth, as they were discussing the gift that Asuta had given her. “In that case, allow me to keep it on my person in a spot where it will not be seen. I cannot bear to part with it.”

“Understood... And could I have you let down your hair?”

While that Sheila girl gathered up her attire from the forest’s edge, Ai Fa undid her hair.

When the maid stood again before a now nearly nude Ai Fa, her eyes opened wide as she stared.

“What, do you still need something further?”

“No... It’s just that you’re so beautiful I couldn’t help but stare...” Sheila answered, looking down as her face went red.

Ai Fa placed her hands on her hips and gave a deep sigh.

“Those aren’t words of praise for a hunter. If at all possible, I would like to hide my naked figure again as soon as possible.”

“M-My apologies!” Sheila then picked up a single piece of clothing from atop the table and brought it to Ai Fa’s bosom. It seemed to be meant for covering the chest, and was festooned with silver ornamentation.

The bits meant to cover her front were made of cloth, but the part that went around her back was a delicate silver chain. Frankly, there was no chance Ai Fa would ever have been able to properly identify its purpose.

The piece of cloth with fine embroidery was in fact meant to go around her waist. That was no real surprise, as the shape was basically the same as what

was worn by girls in town such as Yumi. Still, it had a strange, smooth feeling against her skin, and the way it brushed against her thighs when she moved tickled her a bit.

Next, the attendant draped a sash that shined with gold over the skirt, then added some silver chains that wrapped around Ai Fa's body, along with a transparent shawl that went over her shoulders. There were large half-moon-shaped accessories that hung from her ears, several fine silver hoops placed on her arms, and decorations with red and purple stones braided into her hair. It was an even more extravagant outfit than what was worn to banquets at the forest's edge.

As for her footwear, the part under her soles was made of a soft leather, and they were held in place with sparkling bands and chains. Truly, they looked more like some sort of accessory rather than shoes. In the back of her mind, Ai Fa thought to herself how it would be impossible to even walk around in the forest wearing them.

"Lastly, please put on only what fits properly out of these..." Sheila stated, holding out a number of silver rings with shining stones. Ai Fa chose only the ones of an appropriate size that wouldn't interfere with her holding a blade. "Ah, and I suppose we won't be needing any makeup... You truly are beautiful."

Ai Fa chose not to acknowledge that comment.

"We also have pomade prepared, but I don't believe you need that either. I can smell a faint sweet smell from your hair already."

Ai Fa wanted to shout "Stop that already!" but she forced herself to bear it. At any rate, the troublesome work of changing into this outfit seemed to finally be at an end.

As for the necklace with the blue stone she had received from Asuta, she stowed it gently underneath the cloth around her waist. And when they returned to the room from before, Polarth and Zasshuma didn't hesitate one bit to speak their minds.

"Oh, how beautiful! We could claim you're a princess of Sym and nobody would doubt it for a moment!"

“It would be more than a little unnatural for someone of such high standing to visit the house of Turan without any advanced notice. But still, you came out looking even prettier than I expected...”

Ai Fa only felt more and more irritated. However, they were finally prepared to launch their counterattack. And so, Ai Fa felt a powerful fighting spirit burning bright inside her, directed at an enemy she had never seen.

“Well then, shall we get going? Sir Zasshuma, what do you plan to do?”

“I was thinking of staying behind in the post town and lending the people of the forest’s edge a hand. They’re in the midst of secretly spreading around the fact that the one behind the kidnapping was the daughter of the house of Turan.”

“Ah, I see. Perhaps such precautions are necessary when it comes to dealing with one such as the hot-tempered young Lady Lefreya. It certainly does seem like this will be quite the commotion.” Whether it was down to him having guts or lacking a sense of danger, this Polarth noble always had an earnest grin fixed to his face.

At any rate, Ai Fa got into a tolos-drawn carriage alongside him and left the Daleim lands for their destination in the castle town.

“Shall we say that you are the daughter of a wealthy merchant who has come to purchase the products made in the Daleim lands, Lady Ai Fa? And that you greatly desired the opportunity to eat dinner at the manor of the famed house of Turan? I believe that should be sufficient to prevent Lady Lefreya from doubting your background.”

“I really cannot thank you enough for going to all this trouble...”

“Think nothing of it! After all, Sir Kamyua Yoshu has told me all sorts of terribly interesting things. We have to stick together if we are to stand up against the wicked house Turan!” Polarth said with the same grin as always as the carriage rolled along.

For Ai Fa, he was the second noble of Genos she had met, after Melfried. And yet that alone was enough for her to feel that even among nobles there were all kinds of people.

“Polarth, there’s one thing I wish to ask you.”

“Yes, what is it?”

“Why has there not been a fence constructed to protect the fields in the Daleim lands? If you set things up like in the Turan lands, you could keep the damages to a minimum even if giba from the forest ran wild, could you not?”

“Yes, but the Daleim lands are vast! As long as we do not use slaves like Count Turan, it would be difficult to prepare the funds and personnel. And if we attempted to begin such an undertaking, I’m certain Count Turan would interfere.”

“He would? But why?”

“Because if the Daleim lands had the same level of protection, it would mean greater damages to his own territory. Should a giba seriously attempt to break into the Turan lands, those crude wooden fences wouldn’t last forever. But because our Daleim fields are left defenseless, the giba generally give up before reaching the Turan territory,” Polarth explained, putting on a serious expression for the first time. “Looking to the distant future, I know that constructing fences would be good for our lands. But my father has not chosen that path, and it is assuredly out of fear of Count Turan. Though both of them may be counts, Cyclaeus’s power is unrivaled here in Genos.”

The people of the forest’s edge had generally assumed it was only the farmers working the fields who suffered while the nobles feigned ignorance to their plight, but it seemed the truth was a bit more complicated.

“Still, I don’t think that is the only reason. After all, if the Daleim fields were solidly protected, who knows where the starving giba may go after next. It could lead to greater harm coming to the buildings in the post town, or even travelers along the highway. In the end, the only way to lower the amount of damage is to keep on hunting the giba,” Polarth stated, his earnest grin returning. “That’s why I believe we should focus more on supporting the people of the forest’s edge rather than building any fences. If Count Cyclaeus does fall, and your people gain greater strength, it will surely bring fortune to the Daleim lands as well. In which case, I believe we should lend you our power where we can.”

Polarth must have had some scheme of his own. Before heading to the Daleim lands, Zasshuma had described the man as “calculating,” and said it was hard to tell how much he thought of the people his family ruled. But at the very least, he didn’t seem to be unscrupulous. And for now, that was enough for Ai Fa. She would work together with this noble, as long as it was to save Asuta.

While Ai Fa was occupied with such thoughts, the tolos-drawn carriage reached the gates to the castle town.

4

Around when the sun was setting to the west, they at last passed through the gates of the Turan manor. As they stepped down from the tolos-drawn carriage, the massive stone manor towered over them in the dim light. Together with Polarth and three soldiers, Ai Fa stood facing that huge grey building.

There was no blade at Ai Fa’s hip, though Polarth had one on his person. Even so, apparently that would be taken from him when entering the manor. The pair of them were to enter this nest of evil literally empty-handed.

“Welcome. Please, come this way...”

It was a tall blonde woman with pale skin who greeted them at the entrance. When she noticed the woman’s purple eyes, Ai Fa thought to herself that she might be from Mahyudra.

The soldiers guarding them were ordered to stand by in a waiting room near the entrance, while Ai Fa and Polarth alone were led down a long hallway lit by candles.

Ai Fa held her hands in front of her stomach, slowly walking along with her stride around half of what it usually was. While they were awaiting a response from the house of Turan, Sheila had instructed her on how to comport herself like a lady in the castle town.

Ai Fa hadn’t the slightest idea of whether or not that made her appear to be someone who fit in with the people of the castle town. But at the very least, neither the guards from the house of Turan who were following them nor the

blonde girl who was their guide seemed to suspect anything in particular.

“My thanks for coming, Lord Polarth. Dinner shall be prepared shortly.” In a large room with excessively luxurious fabrics stretched along the walls, the two guests were welcomed by a young girl.

The girl’s hair was light brown. She had on an extremely frilly pure-white outfit, and her face and the look in her eyes were just what one would expect from a noble. This was the girl who had ordered her servants to kidnap Asuta.

Even so, Ai Fa managed to remain calm and composed. Her heart remained so at ease that she even shocked herself. As if she were in the middle of a giba hunt, her thoughts were tense and sharp.



That man standing behind her is one of those fiends...

The strangely short and stout-looking man in armor stood there waiting behind the girl. His appearance was just as the innkeeper Nail had described.

However, Sanjura was nowhere to be seen. If he were there, they would recognize one another and she could level an accusation on the spot, but it seemed that wouldn't be possible. Still, that worked out better for Ai Fa. After all, she didn't want things to turn rough before she knew where Asuta was.

"Hmm, so that's the merchant's daughter with blood from Sym, then?" Lefreya questioned, staring openly at Ai Fa.

Ai Fa had been instructed not to talk unless necessary or look anyone straight in the eyes, so she just quietly stared at around the level of the girl's chest.

"Yes, on her father's side from what I'm told. She was born in Behett, and came here to purchase vegetables from us alongside her father. Her name is Aifaa."

"Oh? Still, father won't be returning until tomorrow morning. If you have your eyes on the Turan fuwano and mamaria, then it seems you are out of luck."

"She of course understands that. If necessary, her father will surely get in contact with Lord Cyclaeus tomorrow to talk business. For tonight, she simply wishes to enjoy this dinner at the house of Turan," Polarth replied, nodding to Ai Fa.

Ai Fa then silently crossed her arms in front of her chest and gave a small nod of her head to Lefreya.

"Quite the pretentious girl," Lefreya grumbled. "Well, so be it. Take your seats. I have a terribly intriguing dinner prepared for you tonight, after all."

"I'm certainly looking forward to it. After all, it has been several years now since I myself have been able to partake in a dinner at the house of Turan."

Under the guidance of the blonde maid, Ai Fa and Polarth took their seats on the left hand side of the table.

Spoons, metal skewers, and wine cups were already lined up waiting there atop the table. And there were two additional sets on the side facing them as

well.

“Oh, my, will there be more participants besides the two of us?”

“Indeed. Father has had guests staying here in the manor for some time now. A metal seller from Jagar and his daughter.”

When she heard that, Ai Fa’s breath stilled. It had just occurred to her. That cheeky girl Diel was staying here in Cyclaeus’s manor. Why had she forgotten such an important detail? If that girl were to reveal Ai Fa’s identity, she would have no choice but to accuse Lefreya of her crimes on the spot.

Don’t grow flustered. If that occurs, I simply need to point out how that soldier guarding her has an identical appearance to the man the guards are searching for. I didn’t want things to turn violent before confirming Asuta’s location, but still...if it comes down to it, I just need to grab hold of that noble girl.

Even without a blade, that much would be simple.

With that thought in mind, Ai Fa held steady as the sound of the door swinging open signaled the arrival of the other guests.

“Our apologies for being so late. Business discussions ran a touch long, you see.”

The first one to enter the room was a middle-aged man with a typical appearance for a southerner. And he was followed by a petite girl.

Today she was wearing an outfit more appropriate for a girl her age and had accessories in her short hair, but this was undoubtedly Diel, who Ai Fa had met at the stalls in the post town. But in contrast to the last time they’d met, she looked completely listless, her green eyes powerlessly staring at the ground.

“Oh, and who are those two?”

“The second son of the house of Daleim, Lord Polarth, and his guest Aifaa. Supposedly she is the daughter of a merchant from Behett who came here to purchase vegetables.”

“Ah, from the house of Daleim? This is our first time meeting. I’m Grannar, a metalworker from Jeland in Jagar. And this is my daughter Diel.”

“I am Polarth. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Polarth smiled blithely and Grannar wore a stubborn look as they greeted one another.

It was then that Grannar's daughter Diel finally looked up in Ai Fa's direction. Her eyes immediately opened wide in surprise. Ai Fa rose ever so lightly off her chair, fully at the ready. However, Diel's lips remained firmly sealed and she didn't say a word.

"Well then, shall we start our dinner? Go ahead and bring out the food."

"Of course..."

The blonde maid exited the room, and before long a number of dishes were carried in. All of them were utterly unfamiliar dishes placed atop high-quality plates. Ai Fa secretively glanced at the dishes, wondering if Asuta had prepared all of them.

Three plates were placed in front of each of the people present. They were all kept to a small portion that certainly wouldn't be filling on their own, though.

"Now then, eat up. The chefs of the house of Turan employed all their skill in preparing tonight's dinner. First up are the appetizer, soup, and fuwano dishes," Lefreya boasted.

Still, none of the dishes especially interested Ai Fa. The small plate farthest right had a heap of vegetables with a very sour smell to them. The soup dish smelled oddly sweet. And the dish beside that had what looked like little round bits of poitan covered in a thick sauce that were giving off steam.

"Ooh, how splendid! I certainly am glad to have brought you along, Aifaa."

The smile on Polarth's face was no act. He looked genuinely excited.

The man must have loved to eat. But that much was easy to tell from his rather rotund figure.

Has Asuta been making such odd dishes here in the castle town?

Just like everyone else, Ai Fa began to eat. However, she just wasn't satisfied.

Those red and green boiled vegetables turned out to taste every bit as sour as they smelled. It was as if fruit wine that had gone bad had been mixed in with them.

The soup dish was thick and terribly fatty. Though the smell was sweet, it actually had a spicy flavor. It must have been boiled together with a wide variety of herbs. And for the solid parts, there was some sort of meat other than giba, chatchi, pula, and other vegetables she didn't even know the name of.

Inside of the round poitan-looking things were thin strips of meat and vegetables. They weren't as hard to get down as the previous dishes, but they had too much salt and tau oil. And sure enough, they had the powerful scent of herbs about them too.

No...

These dishes weren't prepared by Asuta. Even with no proof to base her conclusion on, Ai Fa was confident in that fact. It was possible that Asuta had prepared dishes using ingredients she didn't know to create unfamiliar flavors. But something didn't feel right. She couldn't sense his presence at all in this food.

Were we deceived by that Jeeda boy?

It was possible Asuta wasn't actually in this manor. For the first time, a bit of doubt was cast over Ai Fa's firm resolve.

"My, these are all delicious. I had heard your head chef was at the castle, but everything here is still splendid," Polarth praised, while the guests from Jagar just silently ate.

With a triumphant snort, Lefreya declared, "Numerous chefs reside here in the manor, so the absence of the head chef is not a significant issue. And the real excitement is still to come."

The empty plates were taken away by pages dressed in yellow, and then fresh plates were carried out.

"These are the vegetable dish and the main meat dishes."

There were once again three plates lined up in front of each of them. The vegetable dish was covered in a scarlet sauce. Then there was meat still on the bone that had been boiled together with herbs. Finally, there was a chunk of meat that looked lightly browned.

Ai Fa went ahead and tasted them in order.

The vegetable dish was sweet, spicy, and sour. That same flavor like fruit wine that had gone bad was mixed in, then there was the spiciness from the herbs, and a strange sweetness blended in throughout. It wasn't quite bad, but she just couldn't accustom her tongue to it somehow. The reason behind that might have been that just like with the previous dishes, the flavoring was simply too strong.

The meat on the bone was incredibly tender and was easily the best tasting dish she had eaten so far. Had the meat come from the leg of some sort of small animal? At any rate, it was coated in a green broth, then had red herbs finely chopped up and sprinkled overtop.

The iron skewers...or perhaps they were silver? At any rate, they smoothly pulled the meat from the bone in no time at all. It was so tender that it seemed like it would be difficult to eat without having it fall off, and when she tossed it into her mouth, the slight spice from the herbs seemed to pair very well with the flavor of the meat.

Then, there was the final meat dish...and that was even more delicious. The browned coating surrounding it had a very pleasant crunchiness. And underneath that was a tender meat with plenty of juiciness, which had a faint aroma of myamuu when she chewed into it.

Beyond just the myamuu, tau oil must have been used too. After all, just the right amount of saltiness was filling her mouth alongside the meat juices. It felt just a bit overly fatty, but even that was brought into perfect harmony by the sourness of the sheel juice sprinkled over top.

On top of that, it was served alongside a big helping of fresh, thinly-sliced tino and aria and the like, which tasted quite delicious when eating them together. The meat and the vegetables each helped one another to stand out.

Those vegetables also seemed to have a different sort of sour sauce than sheel poured over them, which was blended with fat from something other than a giba. That seemed to actually supplement the dull flavor of the raw vegetables, while also adding a bit of color.

This is it...

This dish had undoubtedly been prepared by Asuta. The way that meat was flavored using myamuu and tau oil, and the thin slicing of the raw vegetables: it was just like how Asuta did it. However, the brown coating of the meat was a mystery, and it wasn't giba meat either. This really was a completely unfamiliar dish. But even so, Ai Fa was certain it had been made by Asuta.

Asuta really was here in this manor cooking food. And as she held back all the intense emotions stirred up in her chest by that realization, Ai Fa continued to eat his delicious dish.

"Yup, I prefer this dish," Diel suddenly declared after having remained silent for so long.

Looking her way, Ai Fa saw the girl had stabbed her silver skewers into Asuta's dish.

"The kimyuus leg meat still on the bone was delicious too, but this fried dish is even tastier."

"Yes, I'm in agreement with my daughter," Diel's father stiffly chimed in.

"Oh?" Polarth replied while eating the same dish, tilting his head. "Now that you mention it, why were there two dishes prepared just for the meat course? Is this perhaps meant to be a taste test to compare?"

"Yes, that is correct. One was prepared by the assistant head chef, while the other was made by a chef we only just recently hired to the manor. Which do you prefer, Lord Polarth?"

"Let's see... It's true that the meat on the bone has a wonderful flavor, but I must say that I narrowly prefer the fried dish as well."

"And our guest from Behett?"

Ai Fa gently smiled at Lefreya.

"I also find this dish to be more delicious."

"So everyone has chosen the fried meat! Well, I am in agreement! In that case, shall we reveal who prepared which dish?"

At Lefreya's summons, a page solemnly lowered his head.

“The meat on the bone was made by the assistant head chef, while the fried dish was prepared by the newcomer.”

Lefreya’s head tilted up. “I knew it! So the newcomer has now won five nights in a row! The assistant head chef Timalo was skilled enough to run the kitchen at Selva’s Spear, so these certainly are surprising results!”

“Yes, but I suppose that’s what you expect out of a chef from overseas. I’m impressed with how every dish was something new and unknown I’d never tasted before,” Diel chimed in, an unusually demure look on her face.

At that, Polarth’s rotund body leaned forward. “From overseas...? You’re saying this chef came from outside the continent? This is the first I’ve heard of anyone from overseas coming to Genos.”

For a split second, Lefreya looked like she was holding herself back from clicking her tongue, but then she broke out in an incredibly haughty smile. “I did not wish to be so open about the matter, but that is indeed the case. It wouldn’t do to cause an unnecessary commotion, however, so I ask that you keep this matter to yourselves.”

“Ooh, how wonderfully interesting! If you do not mind, could I greet that chef directly? I would like to hand him some copper coins in person as payment for preparing such a delicious meal.”

“Oh, copper coins rather than silver?”

“Yes, as our Daleim house is not quite wealthy enough to pay silver coins for a single night’s dinner.”

“I see... I do not especially mind, but I ask that you keep your word in regards to what was previously discussed.”

“About not speaking of this? Yes, of course,” Polarth answered with a smile, turning toward Ai Fa.

Asuta would be invited here, to this place.

Ai Fa could feel her heart pounding faster and faster in her chest.

Remain calm, she cautioned herself. Starting now, it was a battle against herself, and one she absolutely had to win. She could not lose control of herself.

After that, when they were served a sweet dish, Ai Fa didn't even register what it tasted like.

Once everyone present had finished eating, there was at last a knock on the door.

"I have brought the chef from overseas!"

That voice had come not from a page, but from a soldier.

Slowly, the doors swung open.

And then, he finally appeared...

It was Austa. There was not a shred of doubt at all that it was her clan member standing there. He wore an unfamiliar white outfit, and his cheeks looked ever so slightly thinner. However, there was still strength in his black eyes.

Asuta pursed his lips and glanced around with a combative look, until his eyes fell on Ai Fa. And then, they opened wide in shock. He looked dumbfounded, as if he found it hard to believe what he was seeing and doubted his own sanity...but then his eyes suddenly filled with delight. They sparkled brightly, even though the rest of his face remained expressionless.

"Finally, I've found you... I've so wanted to see you... I thought of nothing else during these days filled with despair..." Asuta's eyes seemed to say. Or perhaps those were simply Ai Fa's own thoughts.

At any rate, she didn't care either way. After all, they had met again at last. And that was all that mattered. Ai Fa's eyes looked upon Asuta, and his eyes looked upon her. Nothing else was important.

"It seems there's no mistake," Ai Fa said almost without thinking. "That man is a member of my house, Asuta of the Fa clan. With that fact made clear, I ask that you allow me to return with him."

He's my clan member, my Asuta. And I won't let anyone else have him, Ai Fa thought to herself, turning toward Lefreya as the unacceptable fate they had been faced with was utterly denied.



Asuta had at last returned to Ai Fa.

Midway through the exchange, Cyclaeus had appeared, but he didn't attempt to offer any pointless resistance. In fact, he looked truly furious at his daughter's thoughtless actions. And he seemed more than a little on edge about how the lower-ranking Polarth so stubbornly questioned Lefreya's crimes. Cyclaeus claimed that he would offer a personal apology to the leading clan heads of the forest's edge tomorrow. And as for the three criminals, he swore they would be judged according to the laws of Genos.

It seemed everything that happened really did fall outside of Cyclaeus's plotting. After all, if the people of the forest's edge had taken up arms, it truly might have turned into an incident that could not possibly be overlooked.

But at least for now, none of that mattered in the least. Ai Fa had gotten Asuta back.

"Um, while I'm changing, could it be just me and my clan head?" Asuta had asked, and so it ended up as just the two of them alone in enemy territory.

However, Ai Fa couldn't allow herself to lose her composure just yet. At any rate, though, Ai Fa just silently stared at Asuta in that wide room made of grey stone.

"Ai Fa..." It seemed that Asuta was still stupefied. However, there were clearly all sorts of emotions whirling about in his black eyes.

And as Ai Fa forced down her own powerful emotions before they burst forth, she examined her clan member all over to make sure nothing was out of place. Fortunately, he was fine. He was a bit slimmer, certainly, but nothing else appeared different.

As she secretly gave a sigh, Ai Fa asked, "You aren't injured anywhere, are you?"

Asuta just shook his head in a daze. "No. As you can see, I'm doing just fine."

"Right..."

Asuta looked terribly impatient, somehow. It was as if he didn't know how to handle the emotions welling up inside of him. And Ai Fa couldn't say she knew

either.

Asuta just needed to hurry up and change. Then, they could return to the settlement at the forest's edge...to the Fa house. They could share the joy they felt at their safe reunion then. Otherwise, Ai Fa would be unable to hold herself back any longer.

Even so, Asuta didn't remain silent, calling out, "Ai Fa, I..."

Just hearing Asuta's voice was enough to cause her composure to feel like it would crumble away. And so, Ai Fa held up her hand to stop him.

She wanted to say, "Hurry up and change." However, the words caught in her throat and she couldn't speak them.

Suddenly, her field of vision started to distort. Despite her intentions, she had started tearing up. Ai Fa would end up losing sight of Asuta, and she couldn't stand that.

She wanted to feel him closer. She had reached her limit, and couldn't possibly control herself any longer. Before she realized it, Ai Fa had called Asuta's name and wrapped her arms around him. Asuta's warmth flowed into her body. This warmth...this is what she had wanted.

"Asuta..." Ai Fa cried out.

Polarth and enemy soldiers were waiting with just a single wall separating them, but any apprehensions at that fact had melted away.

Did people always cry like this when they felt so terribly relieved?

Even that thought soon disappeared from Ai Fa's mind as she sobbed. She wailed, and broke down crying like a child. When her father fell before a giba's tusks, she swore she would never allow herself to show such weakness again, but now Ai Fa had been swept up by a deluge of emotion.

It was Asuta's fault. She was all shaken up on his account.

"Asuta...you unbelievable fool..."

Asuta apologized again and again, hugging Ai Fa back just as firmly.

The Fa clan head sobbed away, thinking they should just meld together so

they could never again be torn apart.

And so, the tragedy that had befallen Ai Fa and Asuta finally came to an end on the fifth night.

Afterword

You have my deepest thanks for picking up this book, the 15th volume of *Cooking with Wild Game*.

As I mentioned in the previous afterword, around a third of this total volume is dedicated to Group Performance bonus stories. Though that makes for a rather irregular composition, I hope that you still enjoyed it.

I prepared thirteen Group Performance stories in total, so now I have finally unveiled half of them. And it is my intent to publish the remaining ones in order as well.

However, devoting too many pages to that has the negative effect of slowing down the main story, so from here on out it may only be one or two per volume. And I believe that distribution will vary depending on the volume, which I hope you all can understand.

By the way, the central characters in the Group Performance actually reflect the results of a poll I published on the web. As I mentioned in the afterword before last, I had run a character popularity poll, and my intention was to give Group Performance stories to the top three. Those characters ended up being Ai Fa in first, Ludo Ruu in second, and Dan Rutim in third, so all three of them got bonus stories.

I think that might have had an impact on Shumiral ending up taking fourth. Since he wouldn't be appearing in the main story for a while as he had left Genos, that bonus incentive might have earned him votes. Unfortunately, that wasn't quite enough to crack the top three, but I had intended to write a bonus story about him to begin with, so he ended up being covered too. Eventually, I would like to share it with you all in novel form.

As for the bonus content this time around, I ended up implementing it into the main story just like last time. Roughly thirty-four pages in the back half of chapter two were brand new, and I hope that you enjoyed them.

I really do feel sorry that Myme didn't get much chance to shine this volume after her introduction last time. Originally, the contents of this volume and the previous one were one chapter, with the first half centering on Myme's introduction.

Furthermore, we got plenty of new characters this time around, and there were hints that more are coming next volume too.

This volume was about Asuta expanding his business dealings, so I hope you look forward to seeing what sort of bonds he will end up forming with these new cast members.

On top of that, the manga version has had volume 1 published, and is continuing to run in Comic Fire.

Both this version and the manga are illustrated by Kochimo, but the way things are expressed really are different between an illustration of a single scene and a manga where everything is drawn out in sequence. It really does always feel fresh seeing the different expressions and actions from Asuta and everyone that didn't show up in the illustrations. I'm truly grateful to have my precious characters drawn out in such an appealing style.

On top of that, the real pleasure of a manga version is getting to see all the various characters who didn't make it into the original illustrations, isn't it? At present, Diga Suun, Tito Min Ruu, Asuta's father, and Asuta's childhood friend Reina have all shown up.

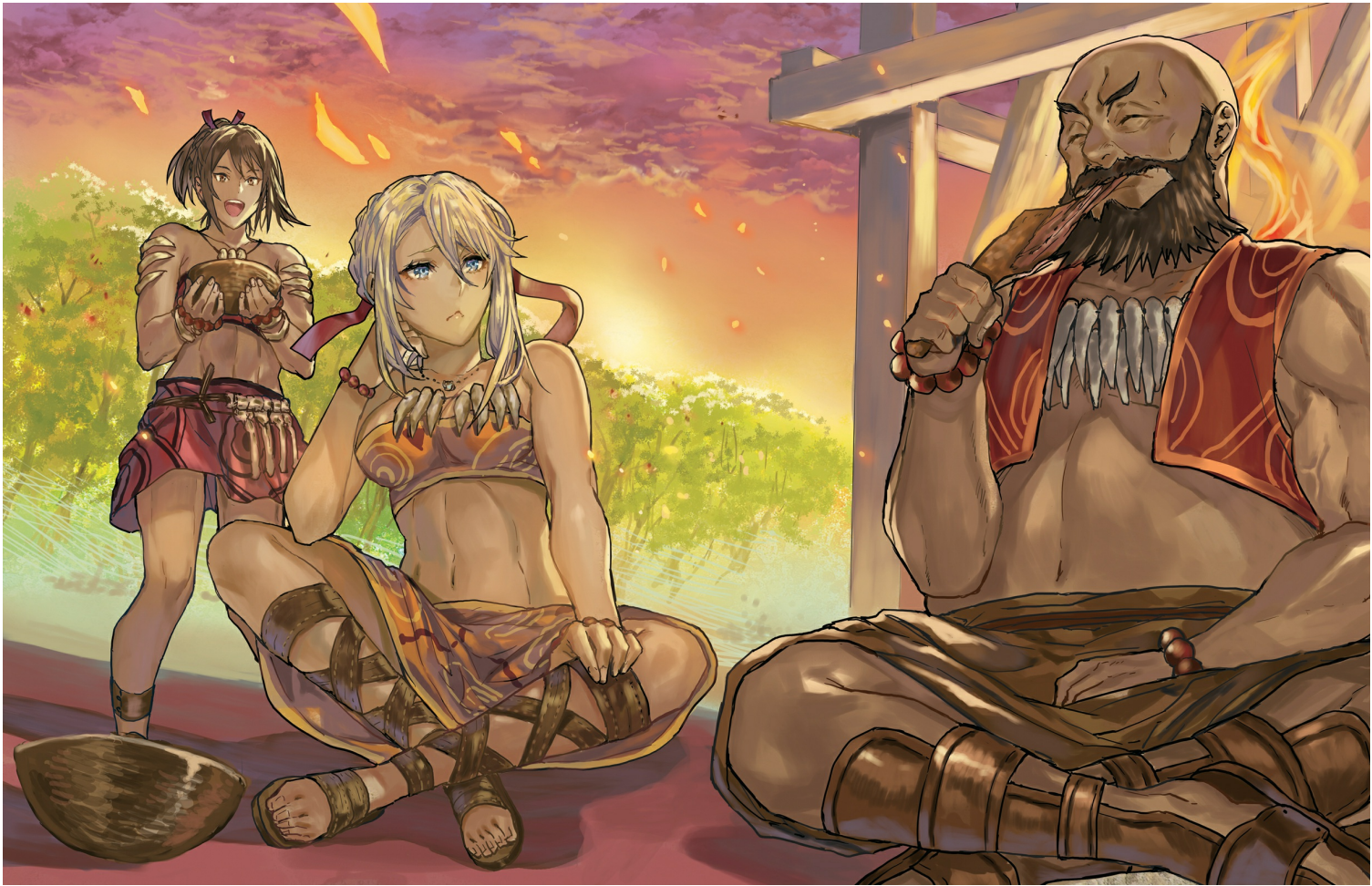
This series has an awful lot of characters in it, so I feel grateful to Kochimo for providing designs for all of them, and look forward to any future reveals.

As always, let me finish by giving thanks to my editor at Hobby Japan, my illustrator Kochimo, everyone else involved with the production of this book, and of course all of you who purchased it.

I hope to see you all again with the next volume!

August 2018,

EDA



Bonus Short Story

Young Women of the Forest's Edge

"Um, could I have a bit of your time, Lem Dom?" a voice called out.

When Lem Dom looked in the direction of the voice, she found Yun Sudra standing there. "What is it? I have to go help Asuta with his work soon, you know."

"I do too. But I was hoping you could spare a moment before we head out." The girl spoke in a perfectly polite tone, but she had a somewhat combative look in her eyes as she stared up at her comrade from the northern clans.

Lem Dom held back a sigh, then turned her whole body to face the girl. "That look in your eyes says you want to complain about something. If you don't mind, I'd like to avoid any trouble."

"If there *is* any trouble, aren't you the one most likely to cause it? First you challenged Ai Fa as soon as you saw her, and then you asked to stay at the Fa house... I think it's pretty obvious that your actions are far outside the norms of the forest's edge," Yun Sudra retorted, pressing in closer to Lem Dom. "Why would you even ask to stay at the Fa house in the first place?"

"To study the frame of mind of a hunter under Ai Fa, of course. What other reason could there be?"

"Is that really all? Do you swear to our mother forest that you don't have any ulterior motives?"

"'Ulterior motives'? Ah, are you perhaps worried that I'll try to make a move on Asuta? You certainly don't need to be concerned about that. I have no interest whatsoever in a man who looks so unreliable."

"P-Please don't insult Asuta like that! He's a better person than anyone I know!" Yun Sudra retorted, her face going all red as she got even angrier.

In response, though, Lem Dom just broke out in a grin.

“Ah, my apologies. Anyone would get angry, hearing such things said about someone they have feelings for. I was wrong to say that.”

“F-Feelings? I-I don’t have feelings for Asuta...”

“You’re adorable, Yun Sudra. At any rate, my heart’s been stolen by Ai Fa, so you have nothing to worry about.”

“Huh? You aren’t saying you feel *that* way about Ai Fa, are you?”

“Why would you think that?” Lem Dom replied with a laugh, flicking the tip of Yun Sudra’s nose. “I promise you I won’t make a move on your precious Asuta, so relax. Still, I’d imagine you aren’t pleased by the thought of the man you like spending the night in the same house as another woman to begin with.”

“I-I’m telling you, it’s not like that...”

“Yeah, yeah,” Lem Dom replied, heading toward the kitchen where everyone was waiting.

Normally, it would be unthinkable for someone from a small clan like the Sudra to level a complaint at a member of the Dom. And yet Lem Dom just felt amused and grateful toward the mother forest for allowing her to meet a girl like Yun Sudra.

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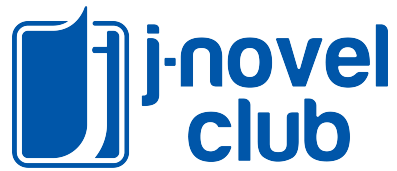
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Cooking with Wild Game: Volume 15

by EDA

Translated by Matthew Warner Edited by Adam Fogle

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